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THE NEW YORKER

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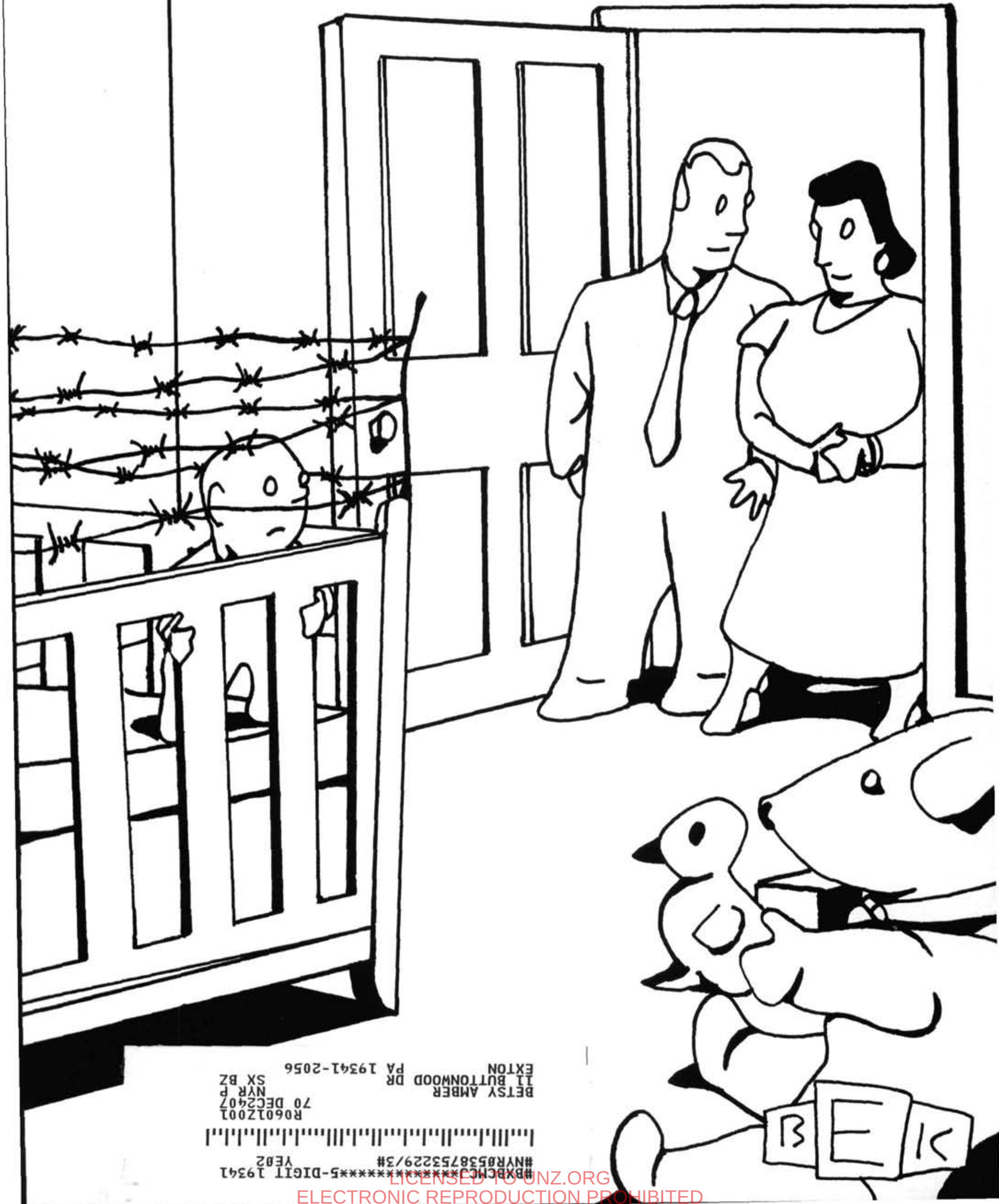

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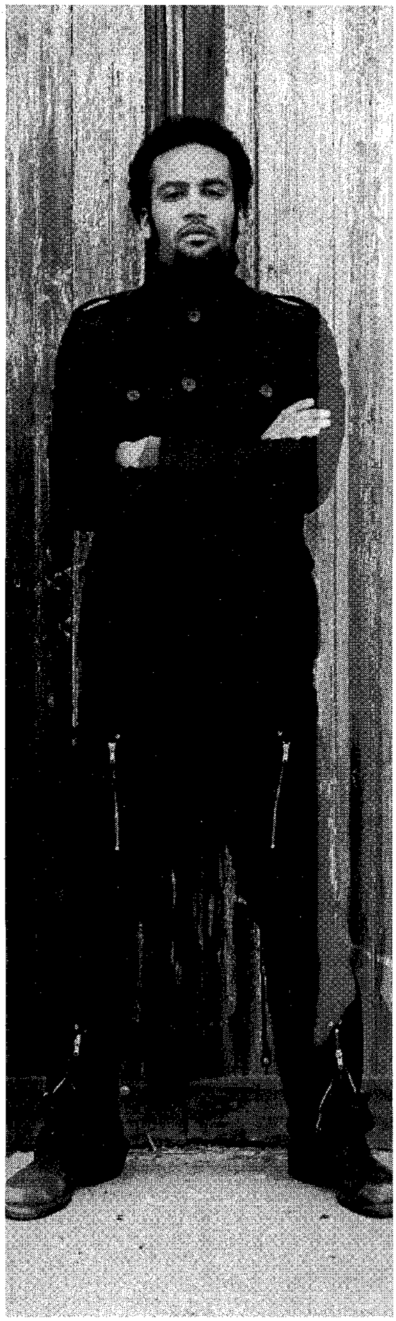

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THE NEW YORKER

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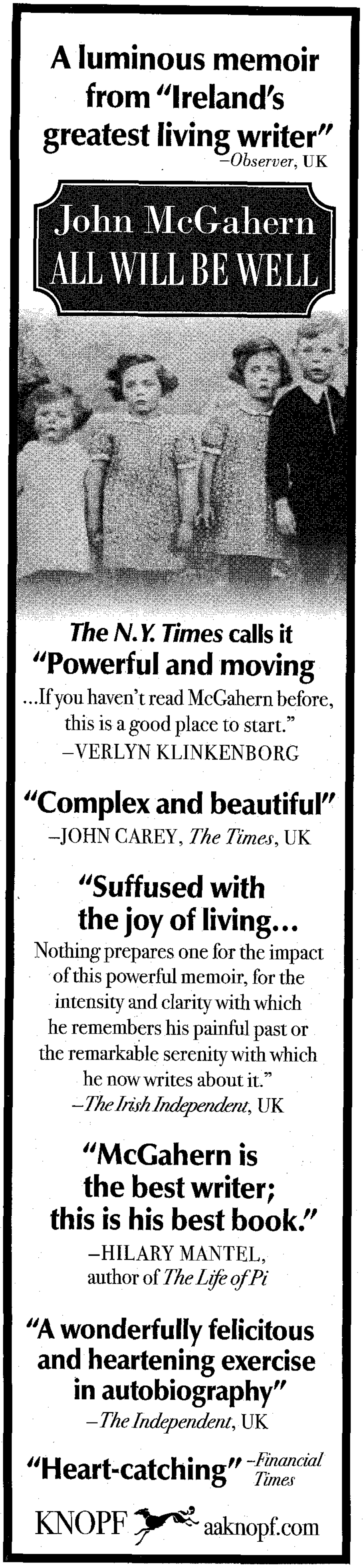

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John McGahern
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–JOHN CAREY, *The Times*, UK

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Nothing prepares one for the impact of this powerful memoir, for the intensity and clarity with which he remembers his painful past or the remarkable serenity with which he now writes about it."
–*The Irish Independent*, UK

"McGahern is the best writer; this is his best book."
–HILARY MANTEL, author of *The Life of Pi*

"A wonderfully felicitous and heartening exercise in autobiography"
–*The Independent*, UK

"Heart-catching" –*Financial Times*

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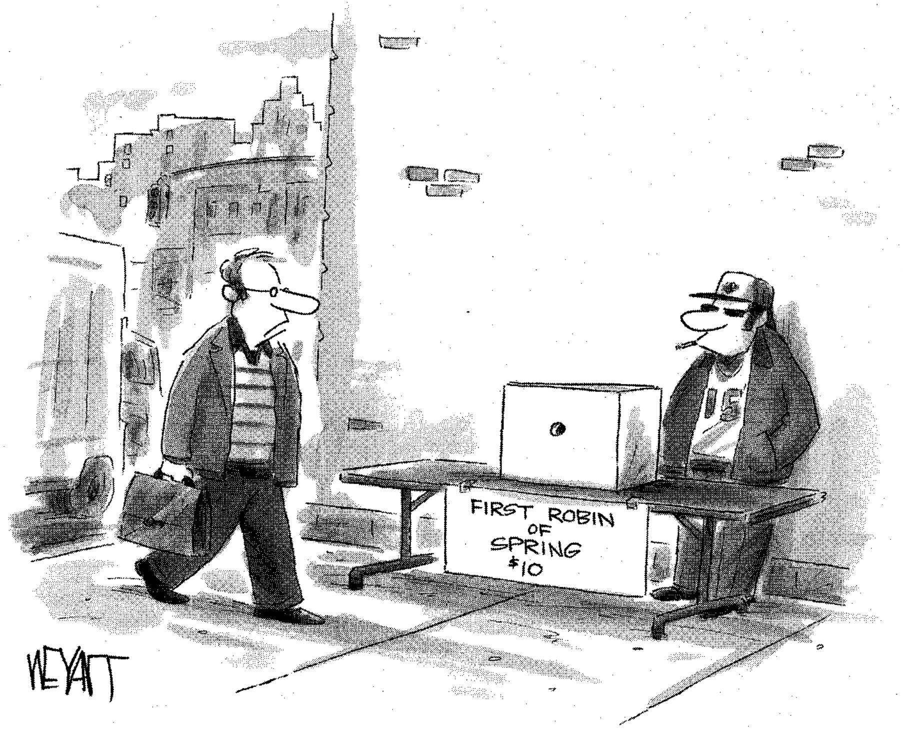
Bruce Eric Kaplan (Cover) wrote and illustrated "Every Person on the Planet," a picture book for adults. ♦



THE MAIL

HELPING THE HOMELESS

Malcolm Gladwell makes the compelling argument that developing permanent supportive housing for those who have experienced long or repeated episodes of homelessness is a fiscally and morally responsible approach ("Million-Dollar Murray," February 13th & 20th). However, we shouldn't have to choose, as Gladwell suggests, between dealing with either the ten per cent of "chronically" homeless individuals or the other ninety per cent who have brief episodes of homelessness. Thousands of low-income and middle-income households fall into homelessness because of unmanageable housing costs or financial emergencies. By focussing almost exclusively on the costliness of allowing "chronically" homeless individuals to remain homeless, Gladwell does not touch on the enormous expense of allowing the other ninety per cent, which includes more than a million children, to cycle in and out of homelessness. Without addressing larger systemic issues, such as insuring access to affordable housing, living-wage jobs, and health care for all, and exercising the political will to solve them, our country cannot realistically hope to end homelessness.

Maria Foscarinis
Executive Director, National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty
Washington, D.C.

Many financial costs associated with homelessness, such as health care and law enforcement, can indeed be addressed by power-law analysis. But financial costs are only one reason that homelessness is a social calamity, and, for many advocates, probably not the most important one. The solutions that power-law distributions offer will have an impact on the lives of only those few whose behavior is expensive and socially disruptive, without addressing the less dramatic plight of the vast majority of individuals and families who are occasionally homeless, and whose situation remains a disgrace to American society. The "average" homeless person's suffering and its causes should still matter to us, and we must rely on our principles, not our statistics, to make that difference clear.

Mark Vanhoenacker
London, England

ASBESTOS CLAIMS

As a former staff writer who published a number of articles in *The New Yorker* about the medical and legal impacts of asbestos disease, I would like to comment on James Surowiecki's favorable review of the Fairness in Asbestos Injury Resolution Act—a bill that proposed to settle all present and future asbestos-disease claims with a trust fund of $140 billion but that recently failed to pass in the Senate (The Financial Page, March 6th). According to five independent analyses, the trust fund would have become insolvent within a few years, amassing a debt variously estimated to be between $8 billion and $150 billion, which would have been borne by the nation's taxpayers. (Indeed, the fund's size was determined by asking asbestos manufacturers and their insurers how much they would be willing to pay to eliminate their liability, rather than considering how many people might develop asbestos disease.) Surowiecki suggests that "unimpaired" asbestos claimants should not receive settlements, but it is important to note that the great majority of these claimants show X-ray evidence of asbestosis—an irreversible, progressive disease that worsens with time. People with permanent lung damage should not have to wait until they encounter difficulty breathing, or have developed lung cancer or mesothelioma, before being compensated.

Paul Brodeur
North Truro, Mass.

•

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Ana Gasteyer, at a costume fitting for a new production of "The Threepenny Opera." Photograph by Sylvia Plachy.

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
26	27	28	22	23	24	25

THIS WEEK

THE THEATRE
FAMILY FEUD

Ali MacGraw, Julianna Margulies, and Larry Bryggman star in "Festen," in previews at the Music Box. In David Eldridge's adaptation of the 1998 film "The Celebration," horrific family secrets are exposed when an imperious patriarch gathers his clan for his sixtieth birthday. (See page 8.)

NIGHT LIFE
POST-SOVIET SOUNDS

The long-running eight-piece Russian ensemble Auktyon (pronounced "auction") is on a brief U.S. tour in support of its forthcoming album, "Pioneer," its first American release. Its live shows are positively revolutionary, and it performs three times this week, at Joe's Pub and the Knitting Factory. (See page 9.)

ART
APRÈS ELLE

The Met opens a show this week organized by Kara Walker, titled "After the Deluge." A post-Katrina meditation on floods, storms, and African-American communities, it includes Walker's own work and pieces she has selected from the permanent collection. A smaller show at Sikkema Jenkins, in Chelsea, displays Walker's drawings, collages, and a shadow-puppet video. (See page 11.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
KRONOS TIME

The voraciously inquisitive Kronos Quartet, ranging across the music of the world, offers three programs at Zankel Hall, including an evening in which the players will choose selections in response to a conversation with the historian Howard Zinn about war around the world. (See page 16.)

MOVIES
MORE AND MORRIS

The choreographer Mark Morris, as part of his twenty-fifth season at BAM, has curated a film series that includes Erich von Stroheim's bilious masterpiece, "Greed" (the two-and-a-half-hour version); Vincente Minnelli's gospel-jazz fantasy, "Cabin in the Sky," featuring Lena Horne, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington; and "The 5,000 Fingers of Dr. T," with a story by Dr. Seuss. (See page 20.)

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THE THEATRE
OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

Please call the phone number listed with the theatre for timetables and ticket information.

AWAKE AND SING!
Clifford Odets's 1935 drama focusses on a Depression-era Jewish family in the Bronx. Starring Lauren Ambrose, Ben Gazzara, Mark Ruffalo, and Zoë Wanamaker. Previews begin March 24. (Belasco, 111 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.)

BASED ON A TOTALLY TRUE STORY
Manhattan Theatre Club presents a new play by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, about a young comic-book writer on the verge of fame. Previews begin March 23. (131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

FESTEN
The American première of a play by David Eldridge, adapted from the 1998 Dogme film "The Celebration," starring Larry Bryggman, Jeremy Sisto, Michael Hayden, Ali MacGraw, and Julianna Margulies. Previews begin March 23. (Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

JACQUES BREL IS ALIVE AND WELL AND LIVING IN PARIS
Gordon Greenberg directs this revival of the 1968 musical celebrating the poetic Belgian composer. In previews. Opens March 27. (Zipper, 336 W. 37th St. 212-239-6200.)

LESTAT
The new musical based on Anne Rice's "Vampire Chronicles" features music by Elton John and lyrics by Bernie Taupin. Previews begin March 25. (Palace, Broadway at 47th St. 212-307-4100.)

LIVING ROOM IN AFRICA
The Edge Theatre Company presents Bathsheba Doran's drama about a pair of Brits who move to Africa to open an art museum. Opens March 22. (Beckett, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

MERCY ON THE DOORSTEP
The New York première of Gip Hoppe's dark comedy about hope and redemption. Jim Simpson directs. In previews. Opens March 23. (Flea, 41 White St. 212-352-3101.)

PEN
Playwrights Horizons presents the world première of a new play by David Marshall Grant, starring J. Smith-Cameron. Previews begin March 23. (416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

THE PROPERTY KNOWN AS GARLAND
Adrienne Barbeau stars as Judy Garland in Billy Van Zandt's play. Opens March 23. (Actors' Playhouse, 100 Seventh Ave. S. 212-239-6200.)

A SAFE HARBOR FOR ELIZABETH BISHOP
A new play by Marta Góes, about the poet's romance with the Brazilian architect Lota de Macedo Soares, with Amy Irving in the title role. In previews. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

SARAH, PLAIN AND TALL
A musical based on the Newbery Medal-winning book by Patricia MacLachlan, about a woman who enters a family's lonely life on the prairie. In previews. Opens March 23. (Lucille Lortel, 121 Christopher St. 212-279-4200.)

SHOW PEOPLE
A new play by Paul Weitz, about two Broadway actors who haven't acted in years. Directed by Peter Askin. In previews. (Second Stage, 307 W. 43rd St. 212-246-4422.)

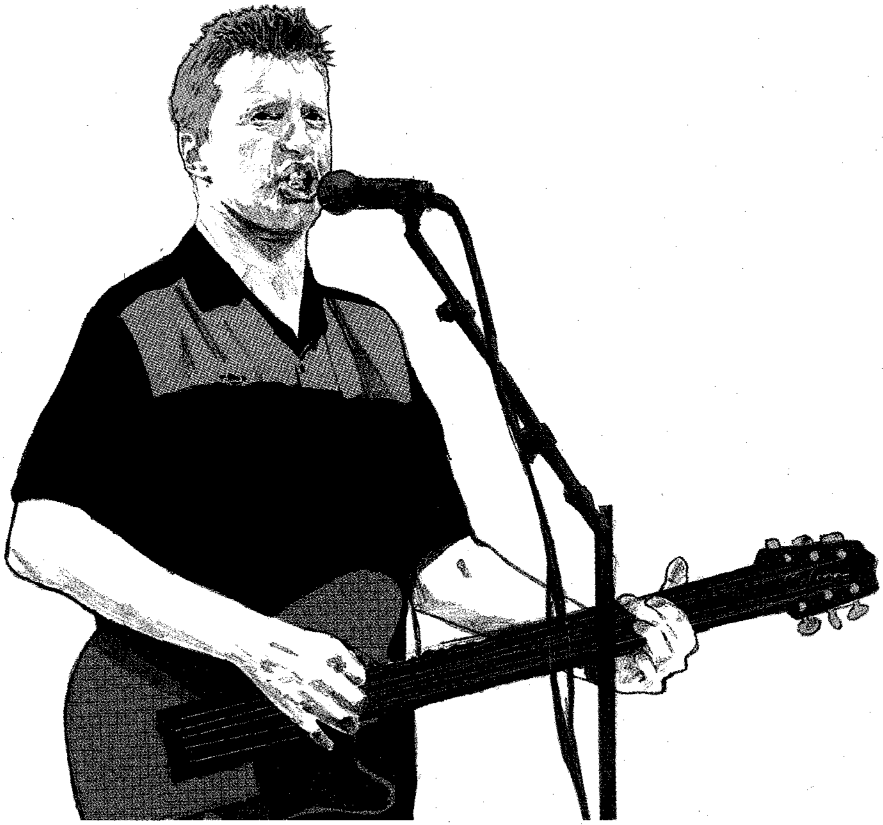
TARZAN
Disney's version of Edgar Rice Burroughs's classic story comes to Broadway. With a book by David Henry Hwang and music by Phil Collins. Bob Crowley directs. Previews begin March 24. (Richard Rodgers, 226 W. 46th St. 212-307-4747.)

THREE DAYS OF RAIN
Julia Roberts, Paul Rudd, and Bradley Cooper star in a revival of Richard Greenberg's drama about siblings who unearth secrets about their deceased father. Previews begin March 28. (Bernard B. Jacobs, 242 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

THE THREEPENNY OPERA
The Roundabout Theatre Company presents the operetta by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, adapted by Wallace Shawn. Starring Alan Cumming, as Mack the Knife; Cyndi Lauper; and Nellie McKay. Scott Elliott directs. Previews begin March 24. (Studio 54, at 254 W. 54th St. 212-719-1300.)

TRIAL BY WATER
Qui Nguyen's play about two Vietnamese brothers who escape their home country to seek a better life. In previews. Opens March 26. (45 Below, 45 Bleecker St. 212-352-3101.)

WELL
Lisa Kron's comedy, which makes its Broadway début after a successful run at the Public in 2004, explores the conventional wisdom of wellness. Leigh Silverman directs. In previews. (Longacre, 220 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200.)



The singer-songwriter Billy Bragg, at the New York Society for Ethical Culture.

RACHEL DOMM

NOW PLAYING

THE EMPEROR JONES
The Wooster Group's production of Eugene O'Neill's play. (Reviewed in this issue.) (St. Ann's Warehouse, 38 Water St., Brooklyn. 718-254-8779.)

ENTERTAINING MR. SLOANE
This revival of Joe Orton's 1964 hit is dead at the center, with barely a laugh to recommend it. Chris Carmack, as Mr. Sloane, the sexy young prole who causes a variety of uproars in the grim British lodging house run by Kath (the excellent Jan Maxwell) and her father, Kemp (Richard Easton), is appropriately sly, but he has no ear for the nuances of comedy, let alone Orton's brand of it. Aside from Maxwell, the only actor who appears to be having fun here is Alec Baldwin, who plays Ed, Kath's wily brother, who also happens to be a closeted gay solicitor. When Ed gets a look at Mr. Sloane, he sets about trying to seduce him with a campy ardor that at first surprises but soon lapses into a one-note performance that becomes as trying as the rest of the production. (Laura Pels, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300.)

FAMILY SECRETS
Just in time for Purim—for which costumes are customarily donned—Sherry Glaser revives her acclaimed one-woman show, now under the direction of Bob Balaban. Glaser plays five members of a California Jewish clan: the conservative patriarch, his manic-depressive wife, the hippie bisexual daughter, the hormonal teen girl, and a love-struck grandma named Rose, who remarries at the local shuffleboard club. Since the show's première, in 1990, the multi-character solo genre has evolved, as have Jewish stereotypes, and Glaser's shticky portraits don't always feel fresh. But, with characters so vividly and warmly realized, it's a pity that Glaser's menagerie will be around only through Passover. (37 Arts, 450 W. 37th St. 212-307-4100.)

GEORGE M. COHAN TONIGHT!
Jon Peterson stars in a musical about the prolific Broadway legend. (Irish Repertory, 132 W. 22nd St. 212-727-2737.)

HEDDA GABLER
Andrew Upton's version of Henrik Ibsen's 1890 play, directed by Robyn Nevin, is long on action and laughs, with some nice costume changes, and an alluring, fashion-conscious woman at its center. Tesman (the perfectly cast Anthony Weigh) has just returned from a six-month honeymoon with his new wife, Hedda (Cate Blanchett), whose foul resentment, disregard for others, and contempt for intelligence, even her own, mark her as something of a savage. Upton dispenses with the various nuances of Hedda's character and leaves us in the company of a woman whose cutting speech is as small-minded as the circumstances in which she finds herself. (Reviewed in our issue of 3/20/06.) (BAM's Harvey Theatre, 651 Fulton St., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100. Through March 26.)

MEASURE FOR MEASURE
The director Beatrice Terry presents a colorful interpretation of what remains the most perverse of Shakespeare's problem plays, yet its very amiability distances us from the outraged cruelty at the textual core. A young nun, Isabella (Rachel Botchan), sets out to win a pardon for her brother, Claudio (Noel Velez), who is accused of fornication and sentenced to death by the unyielding Angelo (Sean McNall). Isabella's own chastity is to be his bail bond: Angelo insists that he will have Claudio executed unless his sister ransoms him with her virginity. This play can exert a queasy fascination when it's done forcefully; here, though, it mostly provokes an ambivalent shrug. (Pearl, 80 St. Marks Pl. 212-598-9802.)

THE MUSIC TEACHER
The concentrated brilliance of the actor and writer Wallace Shawn and his brother, the composer Allen Shawn, are on full display in this chamber opera within a play, presented by the New Group. As Smith, a professor who writes an opera based on ancient themes with a student, Jane (Kellie Overbey), Mark Blum has the sad look of an overly educated basset hound. Shifting between the past and the present, the show is essentially a series of monologues, with Jane and Smith's collaboration playing between their respective reminiscences. Written as if by Gertrude Stein turned comedian, this Cubist-inspired work is intellectually arduous, with moments of real humor. (Minetta Lane Theatre, 18 Minetta Lane. 212-307-4100.)

POINTS OF DEPARTURE
The Intar season continues with a thriller by Michael John Garcés. (Kirk, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

RING OF FIRE, THE JOHNNY CASH MUSICAL SHOW
In Broadway's newest jukebox musical, the shadowy edge that Cash lent his tunes has been scrubbed away, and the Cash songbook is transformed into a wholesome ode to country living. Generic as the enterprise may be, the musical's creator and director, Richard Maltby, Jr. ("Ain't Misbehavin'"), keeps the whole hootenanny alive and kicking; the numbers are rollicking (watch for a fourteen-guitar "I've Been Everywhere"), if uncompromisingly hokey. The production's biggest misstep, apart from a lack of grit, is the inappropriately high-tech set, which uses digital backdrops of farms and county prisons that seem better suited to "Johnny Cash: The Video Game"—which, given his apparent marketability, might well be in the works. (Ethel Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

SAKE WITH THE HAIKU GEISHA
Randall David Cook's play, a quintet of tales based on his experiences as an English teacher in rural Japan, explores the translucent reciprocal gaze between two cultures: the Westerners' often comic bewilderment with the Japanese, and, more poignantly, the eager curiosity of their hosts. The script, an amalgam of glib satire, stray sentimentality, and Noh-inspired parable, suffers from an uncertainty of tone, but within the clutter are moments of subversive clarity. (Perry Street Theatre, 31 Perry St. 212-868-4444.)

SAVAGES
Anne Nelson's historical drama has a lacerating beauty. Set in Manila in 1902, during the raging Philippine-American War, it manages to compress a continuous cycle of conquest and retribution into one night of charged encounters between a naïve young soldier (Brett Holland), whose job it is to guard an ailing military officer on trial, and the Filipina nurse Maridol (Julie Danao-Salkin), who is there to ease the accused man's suffering before his trial resumes again in the morning. Major Waller (James Matthew Ryan) is like a figure out of Conrad—bloodshot and ravaged, accused of enigmatic crimes, half-mad with memory. Nelson, a former war correspondent, brings eloquence to this wartime drama, and the director, Chris Jorie, elicits quietly incisive work from his cast. (Lion, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

SIDD
A new musical inspired by "Siddhartha," the Hermann Hesse classic about a man's wanderings toward enlightenment. (New World Stages, 340 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200.)

Also Playing

ABIGAIL'S PARTY: Acorn, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. **BACK OF THE THROAT:** Flea, 41 White St. 212-352-3101. **BERNARDA ALBA:** Mitzi E. Newhouse, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200. **GREY GARDENS:** Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. **THE LIEUTENANT OF INISHMORE:** Atlantic Theatre Company, 336 W. 20th St. 212-239-6200. **MEASURE FOR PLEASURE:** Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-239-6200. Through March 26. **THE PAJAMA GAME:** American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300. **RED LIGHT WINTER:** Barrow Street Theatre, 27 Barrow St. 212-239-6200. **SOLDIER'S WIFE:** Mint, 311 W. 43rd St. 212-315-0231. **SWEENEY TODD:** Eugene O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200. **[TITLE OF SHOW]:** Vineyard, 108 E. 15th St. 212-353-0303. Through March 26.

NIGHT LIFE
ROCK AND POP

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

BEACON THEATRE
Broadway at 74th St. (212-307-7171)—March 23-26: The **Allman Brothers** wind down their annual multi-night stand.

BOWERY BALLROOM
6 Delancey St. (212-533-2111)—March 23: The over-the-top Swedish band the **Ark** combines the spandex-wrapped sexuality of glam rock with the heart-racing, hip-shaking sound of seventies radio. One part Kiss, one part Queen, and one part Yaz, it's arena rock that's not likely to ever see its natural setting but will certainly put more than a few bodies in motion. March 25: **Animal Collective** matches folksy harmonies and a love of melody with psychedelic experimentation. The results are both beautiful and disorienting. March 26-27: The glistening and captivating post-punk of New York's own **Stellastarr***. March 28: Scotland's **Snow Patrol** layers its ballads with elegiac bombast.

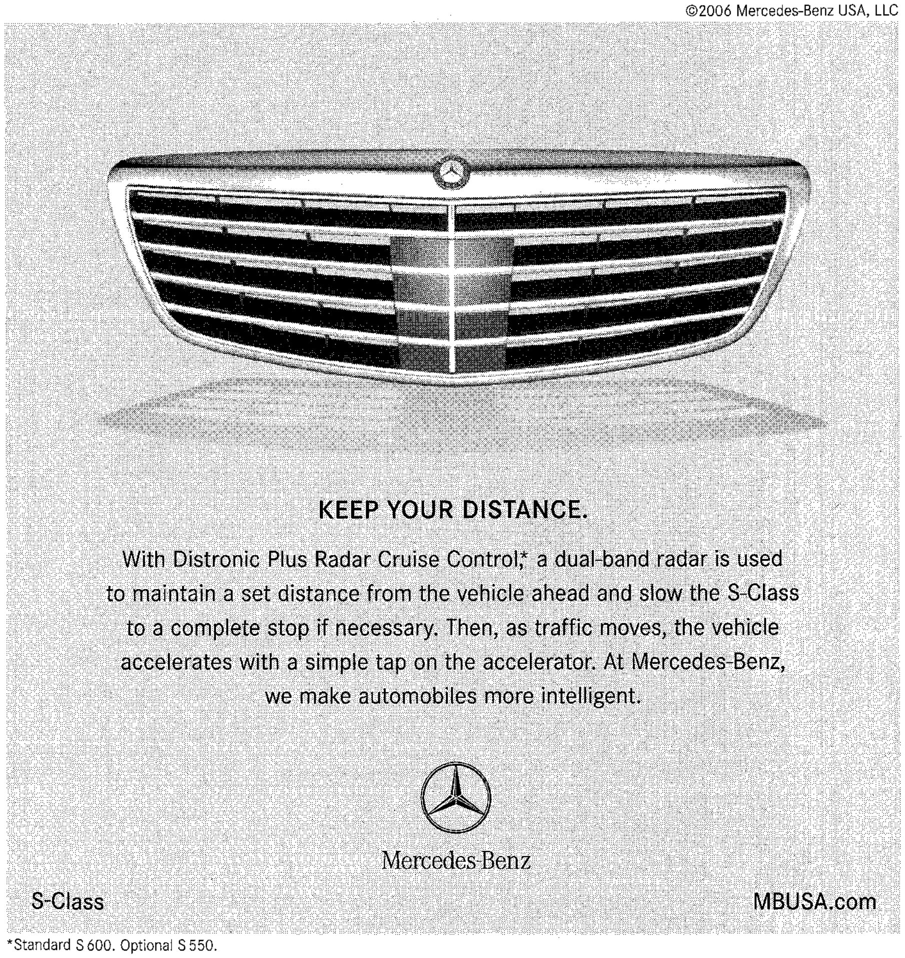
CANAL ROOM
285 West Broadway (212-941-8100)—March 25: **Richard Butler,** taking a break from the Psychedelic Furs, has a new self-titled solo album of dreamy songs. Sensitive adolescents of all ages will find them tailor-made for slow dances.

IRVING PLAZA
17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (212-777-6800)—March 22: **Motion City Soundtrack,** from Minnesota, is getting notice for its snappy pop-punk. March 24-26: The combustible British rock legend **Ray Davies** is back, with his first full album since the demise of the Kinks, a decade ago. By all accounts, "Other People's Lives" shows that the sixty-something rocker's faculties are intact. But, just in case you were worried, he's been including such classics as "You Really Got Me" and "Lola" in his shows.

JOE'S PUB
425 Lafayette St. (212-539-8777)—March 23-24: **Kathleen Edwards,** a native of Ottawa and not yet in her thirties, is a child of the Petty, Williams, and Browne (as in Tom, Lucinda, and Jackson) school of confessional songwriting. March 26-27: When the Russian ensemble **Auktyon** first came together, some twenty years ago, its birthplace was called Leningrad and Boris Yeltsin was just another Party member (albeit an increasingly well-connected one). Leningrad became St. Petersburg, Yeltsin became the President of Russia, and Auktyon went from being an underground favorite to being one of the most revered bands in the country's history. Its music gathers rock, jazz, and ethnic elements into an irrepressible eclectic sound, anchored by Leonid Fedorov's smoky baritone and Oleg Garkusha's energetic vocalizing.

KNITTING FACTORY
74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. (212-219-3055)—March 25: **Auktyon** (see Joe's Pub).

NEW YORK SOCIETY FOR ETHICAL CULTURE
2 W. 64th St. (212-874-5210)—March 24: In the early eighties, **Billy Bragg** was a fiery young lad from Barking, East London, who implored the world, in a thick Cockney accent, to embrace equal measures of Socialism and romance. With Thatcher, Reagan, and Brezhnev running things, Bragg's leftist politics and earnest bedroom theatrics made him a celebrity at home and earned him a devoted following on campuses in the United States. The collapse of Communism knocked him off his soapbox, but he picked himself up beautifully and, in 1991, released "Don't Try This at Home," which featured the love-happy hit "Sexuality." For several years, Bragg spent more time at home than onstage, partly to raise a child; more recently, he's reworked the songs of his hero Woody Guthrie, for the "Mermaid Avenue"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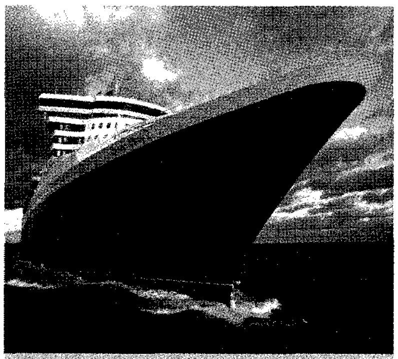

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albums, and returned to the road. He's on tour now to promote a retrospective boxed set, his first.

NORTHSIX
66 N. 6th St., Williamsburg, Brooklyn (718-599-5103)—March 23: The **Go! Team** shrewdly mixes hip-hop, surf rock, and dance pop. March 23: **Witch.** The guitarist J Mascis, famed for his work with the alternative trio Dinosaur Jr., recently put together this new band for a rendezvous with seventies-style THC-laced heavy metal. Mascis isn't playing guitar, though; he's pounding on the drums like an overeager teen-ager. His friend Dave Sweetapple handles bass, and the group is rounded out by Kyle Thomas and Asa Irons, of the Vermont post-folk ensemble Feathers, who sing and play guitar, respectively. With the local favorites the **Panthers.** March 27: The short-lived British band **Th' Faith Healers.**

ROCKWOOD MUSIC HALL
196 Allen St. (212-477-4155)—**Lee Feldman,** a piano-playing songwriter from Brooklyn, is a fixture on the downtown scene. In the late nineties, he received acclaim for his début album, "Living It All Wrong," and scored a contract with Mercury Records. But the label got caught in an industry merger and it never released his follow-up, "The Man in a Jupiter Hat," which Feldman eventually put out himself. Known for tight pop tales of urban life, little vignettes tempered by an incisive sense of humor, Feldman has collected a group of solid local musicians around him, including Teddy Thompson, Steven Bernstein, and Greta Gertler, all of whom contributed to his new record, "I've Forgotten Everything." On March 23, Feldman, backed by his longtime bass-and-drum trio, celebrates the album's release.

RODEO BAR
375 Third Ave., at 27th St. (212-683-6500)—March 23-24: **Lee Rocker,** the bass player for the Stray Cats and the pride of Long Island, unveils "Racin' the Devil," his latest rockabilly CD.

SOUTHPAW
125 Fifth Ave., Park Slope, Brooklyn (718-230-0236)—March 25: **Dr. Dog,** a five-piece band from Philadelphia, makes endearing trifles full of shaggy guitars and heart-grabbing three-part harmonies. The group honed its act on the stages of its home town for more than a few years before releasing its first full-length album, "Easy Beat," in 2005, and its live shows draw a dedicated crowd.

WARSAW
261 Driggs Ave., Brooklyn (718-387-0505)—March 24: **Jesse Malin,** the former front man for the glam rockers D Generation, has matured into an introspective singer-songwriter with more than a few good stories to tell. March 28: **Stellastarr*** (see the Bowery Ballroom).

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

ALGONQUIN HOTEL
59 W. 44th St. (212-840-6800)—Through April 1: The vocalist **KT Sullivan** and her intrepid accompanist and occasional duo partner **Mark Nadler** are known for thoughtfully executing theatrical songs. For this engagement, their target is the can't-miss work of Cole Porter.

BLUE NOTE
131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (212-475-8592)—March 23-26: The tight harmonies and infectious good humor of the **Manhattan Transfer.**

DIZZY'S CLUB COCA-COLA
Broadway at 60th St. (212-258-9595)—March 21-26: **Marlena Shaw,** a singer who has served time in the pop trenches as well as on the jazz scene, receives expert support from the pianist **David Hazeltine** and his trio.

FEINSTEIN'S AT THE REGENCY
540 Park Ave., at 61st St. (212-339-4095)—March 21-25: A mutual love of the music of the nineteen-twenties and thirties unites the singer **Daryl Sherman** with **Vince Giordano** and his **Nighthawks Orchestra.** Their show "The Park Avenue Whirl" salutes the work of composers and performers of the era.

IRIDIUM
1650 Broadway, at 51st St. (212-582-2121)—March 23-26: The songs of the pianist, singer, and composer **Mose Allison** drip with caustic wit, and his eccentric keyboard work mixes rural blues with strains of Bud Powell, Béla Bartók, and Jimmy Yancey. Mondays belong to the electric-guitar innovator **Les Paul.** The **Mingus Big Band** takes over on Tuesdays.

TABLES FOR TWO
DEL POSTO

85 Tenth Ave., near 16th St. (212-497-8090)—The first hint that there is something preposterous about Del Posto, Mario Batali's colossal new venture on the far West Side, is a sign outside announcing "Valet Parking $29." Inside, numerological curiosities abound. The tap water is "triple-filtered," as is the dining experience: you seem to have at least three waiters. Dessert comes in three acts (to say nothing of the cookie cart). Three is also how many stars the *Times* gave Del Posto recently, despite Batali's dream of four, and how many days you may need in order to recover from polishing off a cone or two of the cured pork lard that comes with the bread.

Batali and his partners, Joseph Bastianich and his mother, Lidia, have been threatened with eviction by their landlord over construction that they may or may not have done without permission. The dispute is as overwrought as the atmosphere. The extreme pomp of the place—the footstools for ladies' purses, the high-tea piano music, the miles of marble, the fleets of flatware—can feel like a put-on, as though this were the setting for a reality show in which celebrity chefs compete to see who can charge out-of-towners the most for offal. Some of the dishes may have you looking around for the hidden cameras: the *pici*, for example, a hollow pasta served here with black truffles, coxcombs, and duck testicles, which are bigger than you might imagine and do not taste like chicken, or duck.

In the realm of difficult meats, nothing tops the *bollito misto*. From a tableside steam cart, a cook produces one pale distended body part after another—a veal's tongue, a pig's head, a pig's foot stuffed with sausage—and carves off a portion before returning each hunk to the broth. Next to this barnyard boil, "lamb three ways" looks like beans and rice. The sprawling menu offers subtler pleasures, such as a cauliflower *sformato* (a custard, sort of), with a salad of skate and grapefruit, and chestnut ravioli, with pigeon and myrtle. Too bad they don't deliver. (Open Tuesdays through Saturdays for dinner; beginning April 21st, open daily for dinner. Entrées $12-$40.)

—*Nick Paumgarten*

JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER
Broadway at 60th St. (212-721-6500)—The Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra makes a mighty sound, thanks to its impressive players. On March 24-25, these first-rate musicians, including the trumpeters **Ryan Kisor, Marcus Printup,** and **Sean Jones** and the saxophonists **Joe Temperley** and **Walter Blanding,** get to take the stage in small-group settings.

JAZZ STANDARD
116 E. 27th St. (212-576-2232)—March 23-26: Two authentic hard-bop heroes—the trombonist **Curtis Fuller** and the drummer **Louis Hayes**—co-lead a sextet featuring a pair of young trumpeters worth keeping tabs on, **Sean Jones** and **Maurice Brown.**

VILLAGE VANGUARD
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (212-255-4037)—March 21-26: The **Kenny Barron** trio. The dean of mainstream pianists introduces a new unit with **Kiyoshi Kitagawa,** on bass, and **Francisco Mela,** on drums. The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.

ART
MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-535-7710)—**"Robert Rauschenberg: Combines."** A majestic, exhilarating show of painting-sculpture hybrids dating from the fifties and early sixties. Through April 2. ♦ **"Samuel Palmer (1805-1881): Vision and Landscape."** A major retrospective, co-organized with the British Museum, reviews the work of the Romantic-era landscape painter. Through May 29. ♦ **"Kara Walker at the Met: After the Deluge."** Walker, the artist known for her politically charged silhouette cutouts, contemplates the effects of watery disasters on African-American communities, with examples from her own work and items selected from the permanent collection. Through July 30. ♦ **"A Taste for Opulence: Sèvres Porcelain from the Collection."** Through Aug. 13. ♦ **"The Fabric of Life: Ikat Textiles of Indonesia."** Through Sept. 24. ♦ **"The Armored Horse in Europe, 1480-1620"** is a one-room show of leather and metal examples from the golden age of the obsolete craft of horse armor. Items range from brutally practical sets made for low-ranking soldiers to more fanciful designs displayed by kings in military parades. Through Jan. 14, 2007. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9400)—**"Edvard Munch: The Modern Life of the Soul"** is the first American museum retrospective of the Norwegian artist (1863-1944) in thirty years. Through May 8. ♦ **"Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking."** Through May 22. ♦ The retrospective **"John Szarkowski: Photographs."** Through May 15. ♦ **"On-Site: New Architecture in Spain."** Through May 1. (Open Wednesdays through Mondays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Friday evenings until 8.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—**"David Smith: A Centennial."** Smith (1906-65) parlayed his experiences as a welder, an employee of the Studebaker company, a painter, and an acolyte of the Cubist movement into tremendous steel sculptures that were championed by Clement Greenberg and have become emblems of American modernism. Through May 14. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Fridays, 10 to 8.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (800-944-8639)—**"Day for Night,"** the 2006 Biennial, curated by Philippe Vergne and Chrissie Iles. There are more than a hundred artists represented. Through May 28. (Open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 1 to 9.)

BROOKLYN MUSEUM OF ART
200 Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—**"William Wegman: Funney/Strange."** This major retrospective goes beyond endearing, anthropomorphic photographs of Weimaraners (though those are here, too) with forty years of the artist's paintings, drawings, videos, and films. Through May 28. ♦ **"Symphonic Poem: The Art of Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson."** In many precincts, Robinson's diverse work (taking the form of paintings, sculptures, quilts, and drawings) would qualify more as craft than art, given her predilection for bright calico, buttons, and smiling figures painted in kid-friendly colors. Pieces bearing titles like "Makin' Sweet Soap in the Backyard" underscore the cozy hominess of this artist, who is based in Columbus, Ohio; others explore the lineage of her practice, back to African and African-American craft traditions and to fellow-artists like Betty Saar. "The Sacred Pages: Journey Through the Holy Land," a sprawling cloth book, and woodcuts, which commemorate historically black Brooklyn neighborhoods, also demonstrate her work's engagement with the larger world. Through Aug. 13. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5, and Saturdays and Sundays, 11 to 6.)

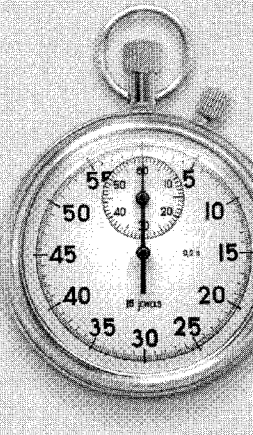
Elvis Presley plays a gunslinger in Don Siegel's "Flaming Star," at Film Forum.

EDEL RODRIGUEZ

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
Central Park W. at 79th St. (212-769-5100)—**"Darwin"** traces the discoveries and influence of the great naturalist (1809-82) with, among other things, a re-creation of his study, samples of fossils he collected, and live specimens of tortoises, frogs, and iguanas like those that he encountered in the Galápagos Islands. Through May 29. ♦ **"The Butterfly Conservatory: Tropical Butterflies Alive in Winter"** is back for the eighth year. Through May 29. (Open daily, 10 to 5:45.)

NEUE GALERIE
1048 Fifth Ave., at 86th St. (212-628-6200)—**"Klee and America"** surveys the dialogue between the artist, whose work was influenced by Native American art, and this country, which embraced him in the thirties and forties, when he was suffering rejection as "degenerate" in Austria. Through May 22. (Open Thursdays, and Saturdays through Mondays, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 11 to 9.)

NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
Temporarily situated in the Chelsea Art Museum, 556 W. 22nd St. (212-219-1222)—**"Andrea Zittel: Critical Space,"** a retrospective of the artist's highly specialized vehicles, living units, furnishings, textiles, and "uniforms" (which she constructs and wears for six months at a stretch).



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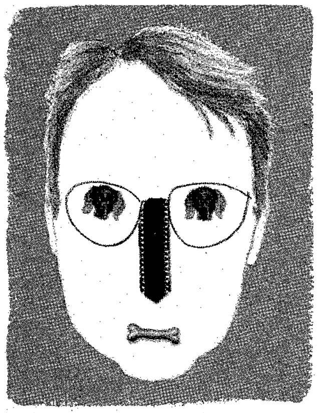
PUPPY LOVE



Beyond celebrating the world's leading Weimaraner wrangler, "William Wegman: Funney/Strange," at the Brooklyn Museum, is sneaky/great, conferring historical gravitas on a doyen of phlegmatic clownery. Wegman, born in 1943, emerged around 1970 as a canny and droll post-minimalist with drawings, staged photographs, and videos that solemnly play out arbitrary premises. (A spotted hand lifts a slice of *cotto* salami from a plate on a spotted table.) His first dog, the sainted Man Ray (1970-82), collaborated in wide-ranging philosophical investigations. (What thought enables proper endurance of a cascade of flour? Man Ray's body language hazards "This, too, shall pass.") Over the past two decades, Wegman has made paintings that tease images from random marks or extrude imaginary worlds from collaged postcards—enlisting his unconscious like another sort of equable animal companion. His work traverses most of what inventive art has been about in our time with the hardly aware grace of a sleepwalker who dreams of Fred Astaire.

—*Peter Schjeldahl*

Futuristic fantasies of streamlined practicality aside, no other artist so thoroughly addresses the intersection of consumerism and community. Through April 29. (Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, noon to 6, and Thursday evenings until 8.)

NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY
170 Central Park W., at 77th St. (212-873-3400)—**"Slavery in New York."** Through March 26. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 10 to 6.)

P.S. 1 CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER
22-25 Jackson Ave., at 46th Ave., Long Island City (718-784-2084)—Jessica Stockholder's installation **"Of Standing Float Roots in Thin Air"** is almost too well balanced. Through May 1. ♦ **"Jessica Rankin: The Measure of Every Pause."** Through May 1. ♦ **"Wolfgang Tillmans: Freedom from the Known."** Through May 29. (Open Thursdays through Mondays, noon to 6.)

UKRAINIAN MUSEUM
222 E. 6th St. (212-228-0110)—**"The Tree of Life, the Sun, the Goddess: Symbolic Motifs in Ukrainian Folk Art."** Through Sept. 30. (Open Wednesdays through Sundays, 11:30 to 5.)

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

Galleries are usually open Tuesdays through Saturdays, from around 10 or 11 to between 5 and 6; please call the gallery for exact hours.

EMMET GOWIN
Although Gowin's new photographs are grounded in familiar subjects—the uncommon beauty of the natural world and of his wife, Edith—they are unlike any he's shown before. Several are unique, gold-toned prints on handmade paper, and they share an almost childlike sense of wonder in the marvellous variety of life. A dizzying profusion of tropical leaves and flying insects animate many of Gowin's images, sometimes gathered around backlit silhouettes of Edith and an antic cast of cutouts. The tangled time-lapse records of moths' flight patterns unravel like gossamer stitchery around her glowing head. Gowin's notes make clear that this paradise could be forever lost, but here, at least, it's found. Through April 1. (Pace/MacGill, 32 E. 57th St. 212-759-7999.)

DAVID HAMMONS
A spare but informative survey spanning the years 1987 to 2004 showcases Hammons's visual puns. Zipper tabs in a mesh-covered jar are "flies," and a trio of old-fashioned microphones is titled "Which Mike Would You Like to Be Like?" The artist's long-standing interest in basketball as a symbolic art also appears, in a hoop and backboard made from a scrap-metal ring mounted on a car windshield, and a whitewashed chunk of tree trunk lying on the floor, a wire circle embedded in its side. The wall above this ghetto-surrealist artifact is marked with cloudy, round impressions made by a bounced ball, and beside the tree, like a guard, stands a tall African urn made of warm-toned reddish clay. Through April 1. (Zwirner & Wirth, 32 E. 69th St. 212-517-8677.)

KORI NEWKIRK
The L.A.-based artist's hanging sculpture "Glint," a cityscape made of artificial hair strung with pony beads, has been drawing notice as one of the few decorative pieces in the Whitney Biennial. Viewers intrigued by his use of that medium can see two more examples at the Project. A large open-ended box formed from undulating sheets of plastic beads is suspended from the ceiling in one room; its dreamy, chlorinated blues conjure a back-yard swimming pool in deep summer. Down the hall, a smaller wall hanging depicts a tree against sky, and three photographs further address themes of Edenic suburbia, racial identity, and social aspiration. Through March 24. (37 W. 57th St. 212-688-1585.)

ALEXEY TITARENKO
Born and based in St. Petersburg, Titarenko photographs his city as a ghost town, teeming with wraiths struggling to escape the pall of history. Long black-and-white exposures render people as little more than blurs or banks of fog on streets under pale winter light: a dim memory of human presence in a stolid landscape. Two black cats crouching at the end of a snowy alleyway are more substantial than the crowds surging through many of the other images. Perhaps, Titarenko suggests, the true spirit of a city is ephemeral, and St. Petersburg is best captured in the steamy breath of past and present lives. Through April 1. (Nailya Alexander, 24 W. 57th St. 212-315-2211.)

Short List

PETER BEGLEY: Salander-O'Reilly, 20 E. 79th St. 212-879-6606. Through April 29. **THIERRY DE CORDIER / PIERRE HUYGHE:** Marian Goodman, 24 W. 57th St. 212-977-7160. Through April 8. **LOIS DODD:** Alexandre, 41 E. 57th St. 212-755-2828. Through April 1. **YVONNE JACQUETTE:** DC Moore, 724 Fifth Ave. 212-247-2111. Through April 22. **FRANCIS PICABIA:** Michael Werner, 4 E. 77th St. 212-988-1623. Through April 15. **TOM WESSELMANN:** L & M, 45 E. 78th St. 212-861-0020. Through April 15. **FRED WILSON:** PaceWildenstein, 32 E. 57th St. 212-421-3292. Through April 15.

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

SIMEN JOHAN
In most of Johan's previous photographs, children's fanciful, terrifying inner lives were made disconcertingly real through digital manipulation of actual and imaginary people, places, and things. Animals—just as uncanny but mostly far more domesticated—are the subject of his excellent new photos and taxidermy-based sculptures. A pair of white owls perch together on a picnic table in the fog and two foxes sit side by side in the snow—contented couples at peace with nature. But two moose butt magnificent heads in a piece the size of a history painting (and the closest thing to a Walton Ford painting in the room), while chartreuse parakeets buzz them from all sides. Through April 1. (Milo, 525 W. 25th St. 212-414-0370.)

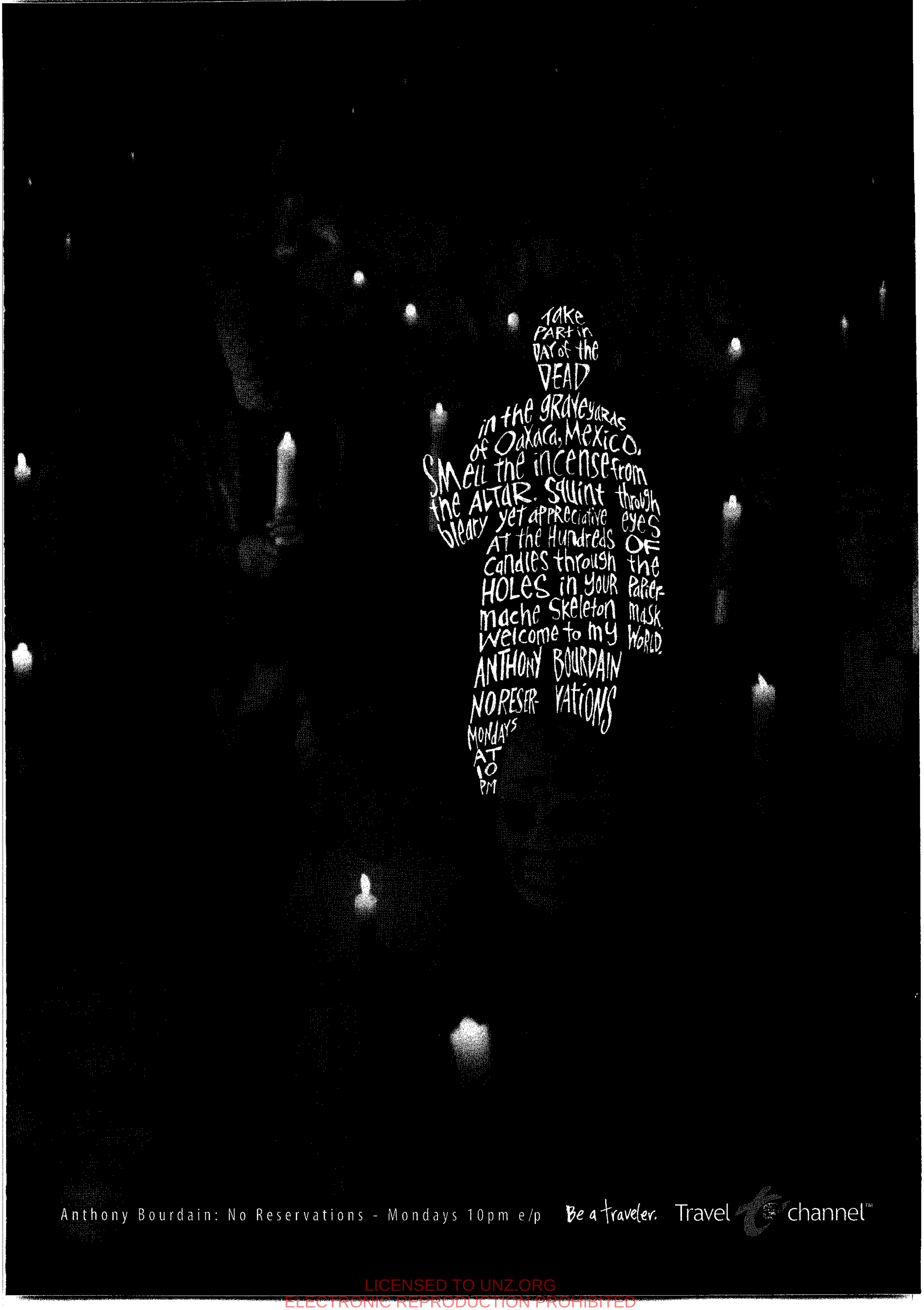
JENNIFER AND KEVIN MCCOY
The McCoys do nifty things with video cameras, mirrors, and miniature film sets, although at times their Laurie Simmons-meets-David Lynch formula seems to be wearing thin. In "Dream Sequence," tiny male and female doppelgängers for the artists sleep in their beds while a miniature set rotates behind them, captured by cameras and projected onto the wall, suggesting other, unconscious worlds. "Double Fantasy II" uses a similar setup, with tiny figures representing the artists. Here they're nine-year-olds "dreaming" via projected images about their adult lives. The references to film and media theory and psychoanalysis are, as always, impeccable, but the McCoys' techno-kitsch aesthetic comes with risks—mostly that it evokes a toy-railroad tableau commandeered by a precocious prepubescent tinkering in a suburban basement. Through April 8. (Postmasters, 459 W. 19th St. 212-727-3323.)

KELLEY WALKER
Walker represents the second—possibly the third—generation of appropriation, in which artists have to dig a little deeper into image culture to make a statement but can also circle back to movements, like Abstract Expressionism, that their progenitors would have considered exhausted. Civil-rights-era photographs are printed on canvas and splattered with chocolate; fashion spreads and vintage advertisements are squirted with toothpaste and rephotographed; Michael Jackson's infamous arrest photo is enlarged and duplicated. Walker stakes much on the images chosen, from the racially charged to the culturally dissipated. He's also borrowed an old painting trick, turning many of the images on their sides, to see if, upended, their impact registers differently. Through March 25. (Cooper, 521 W. 21st St. 212-255-1105.)

Short List

SEBASTIAAN BREMER: Roebling Hall, 606 W. 26th St. 212-929-8180. Through March 25. **TOMORY DODGE:** CRG, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-

HANOCH PIVEN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229-2766. Through April 1. **TARA DONOVAN:** PaceWildenstein, 545 W. 22nd St. 212-989-4258. Through April 22. **JUDITH EISLER:** Cohan and Leslie, 138 Tenth Ave. 212-206-8710. Through March 25. **LOUISE FISHMAN:** Cheim & Read, 547 W. 25th St. 212-242-7727. Through March 25. **SHIRAZEH HOUSHIARY:** Lehmann Maupin, 540 W. 26th St. 212-255-2923. Through March 25. **WILLIAM LAVEN:** Foley, 547 W. 27th St. 212-244-9081. Through April 15. **WILLIAM NICHOLSON:** Kasmin, 293 Tenth Ave. 212-563-4474. Through March 25. **TONY OURSLER:** Metro Pictures, 519 W. 24th St. 212-206-7100. Through March 25. **KARA WALKER:** Sikkema Jenkins, 530 W. 22nd St. 212-929-2262. Through April 1. **RACHEL WHITEREAD:** Luhring Augustine, 531 W. 24th St. 212-206-9100. Through April 1. **"MOTORE IMMOBILE":** Greene Naftali, 526 W. 26th St. 212-463-7770. Through April 1.

DANCE

MARK MORRIS DANCE GROUP
BAM's mostly retrospective celebration of the company's twenty-fifth anniversary concludes with a program featuring the two sole New York premières. "Cargo," set to Darius Milhaud's jazzy "La Création du Monde," is based on the "cargo cults" that developed when detritus from shipwrecks—in this case, a pole—washed up on islands and was worshipped. "Candleflowerdance," set to Stravinsky's Serenade in A, is an understated chamber piece of free-flowing geometry. Also on the program are "Going Away Party"—a part-camp, part-poignant barn dance, performed live by the country band Western Caravan—and a powerful and spiky Bartók interpretation, "All Fours." (Howard Gilman Opera House, 30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100. March 22 and March 25 at 7:30 and March 23 at 7.)

TERE O'CONNOR DANCE
Last year, Tere O'Connor took home a Bessie for the vivid, original "Frozen Mommy." In developing "Baby," his new evening-length quintet, the resolutely non-narrative choreographer pushed himself even further to "locate the structures" inherent in his dreamlike, episodic material. The resulting dance feels like a sequence of film clips in some strange, half-intelligible language—the images are potent, the people intriguing, yet you strain to catch their meaning. Filled with feints and provocations, the slippery "Baby" overflows with stimuli—singsong phrases, protruding tongues, hand-slapped rhythms, and even fake snoring, which O'Connor's game dancers (including Christopher Williams) bring off convincingly. (Dance Theatre Workshop, 219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. March 22-25 at 7:30. Through April 1.)

COMPLEXIONS
The flashy, charismatic contemporary-ballet company of the former Ailey principals Dwight Rhoden and Desmond Richardson offers a world première and two revivals. (New Victory, 209 W. 42nd St. 212-563-2266. March 23-24 at 7, March 25 at 2 and 7, and March 26 at noon and 5.)

"WHAT WE WHEN WE"
The downtown choreographer Yasuko Yokoshi has spent the last three years studying the Kanjuro Fujima school of traditional Kabuki *Su-odori*, or plain dance, performed in a kimono but without dramatic makeup. Its stylized, understated movements deconstruct gestures to their basic elements—an inward-turned toe, the handling of a fan, an upward glance—imbuing each slight change with meaning. Yokoshi has applied this eloquent yet spare repertoire of movements to scenes inspired by "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," Raymond Carver's laconic story about the impossibility of defining emotion, performed here by five Japanese dancers trained in Western dance. The effect is surprising, enigmatic, and beautiful. (Danspace, St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 212-674-8194. March 23-26 at 8:30.)

WORK & SHOW FESTIVAL
The annual festival, which débuts the products of a yearlong residency, begins with work by the choreographers Ellis Wood and Pedro Ruiz. Wood offers two parts of her four-elements study of embattled femininity. In "Fire," the members of the all-female company writhe like maenads, topless in a conflagration of red tulle; in "Air," they struggle against the output of four industrial fans, backed by Ed Rawlings's full-wall projection of things blown in the wind. Ruiz, who recently retired after an exemplary dancing career with Ballet Hispanico, offers "Mediterranea," a straightforward valentine to the Iberian roots of his Cuban family. (Tribeca Performing Arts Center, 199 Chambers St. 212-220-1460. March 24-25 at 7.)

SAVION GLOVER AND MCCOY TYNER
Once touted as a hip-hop artist, the king of tap turned out to be a disciple of John Coltrane who often turns in his best performances when jamming with jazz legends like Wayne Shorter. That pattern should hold doubly true as Glover teams up with Tyner, the pianist for Coltrane's great sixties quartet. (Aaron Davis Hall, Convent Ave. between W. 134th and W. 135 Sts. 212-650-7100. March 24 at 7:30.)

AMERICAN REPERTORY BALLET
This week at Symphony Space, the New Brunswick-based company, directed by the British-born choreographer Graham Lustig, premières "Exorcising Man," by Lauri Stallings, as well as the Twyla Tharp favorite "Baker's Dozen," set to live nineteen-twenties jazz piano tunes. The program is bookended by two works by Lustig: "Vista," a sexy, slight piece set to music by the Lounge Lizards, and "Dialogues," an atmospheric ballet danced to Michelangelo's love sonnets for piano and voice by the composer Pat Rasile (performed live), featuring an appearance by the modern-dance legend Carmen de Lavallade. On Saturday, there will be a family matinée of Lustig's gothic interpretation of the lugubrious French fairy tale "Beauty and the Beast." (Broadway at 95th St. 212-864-5400. March 24 at 8 and March 25 at 4 and 8.)

KAROLE ARMITAGE / BRIAN REEDER
The Guggenheim's "Works and Process" series has commissioned three works with a common French thread. "Visual Brainstorming" is a seventeen-minute piece by Karole Armitage for her recently formed New York-based company, set to music by the French composer Gérard Pesson, with movements inspired by the human-mirror neuron system—neurons that react both when we perform a specific task and when we see it performed by someone else. It will be presented alongside a kind of "slasher" ballet by Brian Reeder (complete with a masked murderer, flashlights, and artfully laid-out corpses), for five young, lithe dancers from the A.B.T. Studio Company, set to a creepy score by another French composer, Marc André. A non-dance interlude consists of a musical setting of *rondeaux* by the fifteenth-century poet Charles, Duc d'Orleans, by Peter Phillips of the Tallis Scholars, for mezzo-soprano. All music will be performed live. (Guggenheim Museum, Fifth Ave. at 89th St. 212-423-3587. March 26-27 at 8.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA
March 22 at 8: Tchaikovsky's **"Mazeppa,"** with Elena Evseeva, Olga Savova, Oleg Balashov, Nikolai Putilin, and Paata Burchuladze; Valery Gergiev conducts. ♦ March 25 at 8: With Olga Guryakova replacing Evseeva. ♦ March 27 at 8: With the formidable Larissa Diadkova replacing Savova, Victor Chernomortsev replacing Putilin, and Mikhail Kit replacing Burchuladze. ♦ March 23 at 8: Giancarlo Del Monaco's hidebound production of **"La Forza del Destino"** is hardly beloved, but fine singing from the likes of Deborah Voigt, Ildikó Komlósi, Salvatore Licitra, Mark Delavan, Juan Pons, and Vitalij Kowaljow should enliven the final performance; Gianandrea Noseda. ♦ March 24 and March 28 at 8: Whenever the soprano Karita Mattila returns to the Met, it is an occasion. She takes the title role in **"Fidelio,"** Beethoven's happy symphony of freedom and justice, which has the added attraction of Jürgen Flimm's bracing production, set in a police state of vaguely twentieth-century provenance. Also with Jennifer Welch-Babidge, Richard Margison, Gregory Turay, Alan Held, Kristinn Sigmundsson, and James Morris; Paul Nadler. ♦ March 25 at 1:30: Verdi's **"Luisa Miller,"** with Veronica Villar-

roel, Irina Mishura, Neil Shicoff, Carlos Alvarez, James Morris, and Phillip Ens; Maurizio Benini. (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

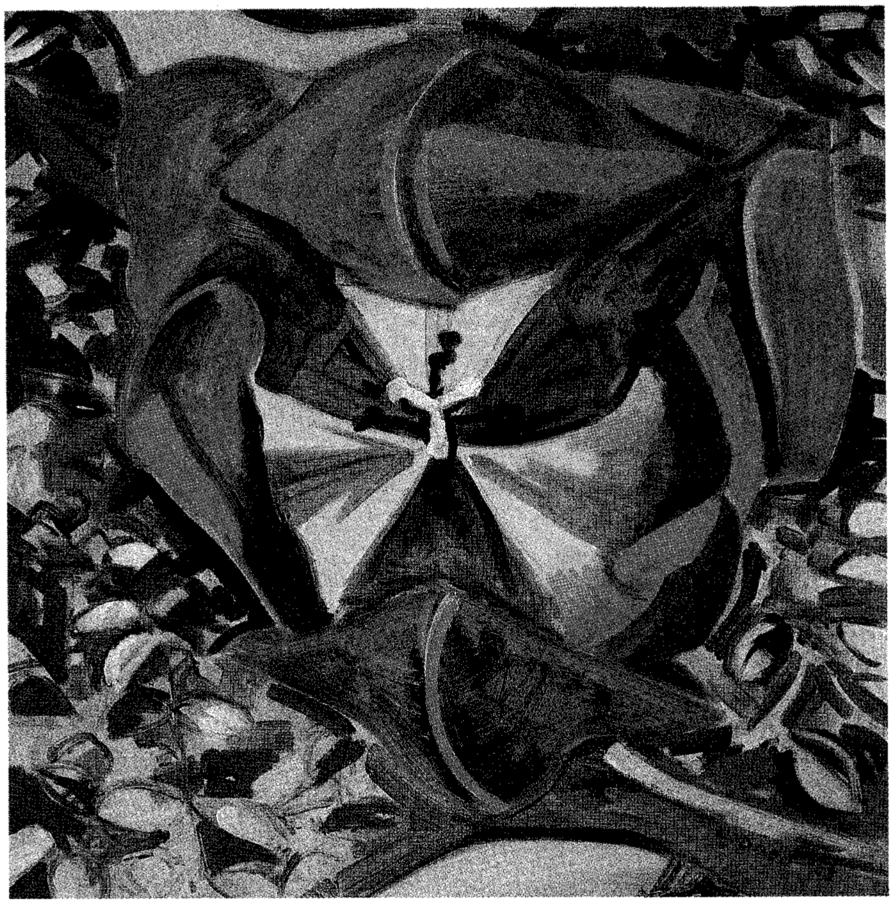
NEW YORK CITY OPERA
March 22-23 at 7:30 and March 25 at 8: Paul Sorvino's indefinite but intense vocalism distinguishes the final performances of Frank Loesser's very operatic musical **"The Most Happy Fella,"** in which the renowned film actor is surrounded by an able cast that includes Lisa Vroman (as Rosabella) and Ivan Hernandez (as Joe); George Manahan conducts. (Note: Braden Toan replaces Manahan on March 23.) ♦ March 24 at 8: **"La Bohème,"** with Kelly Kaduce, Shannah Timms, Gerard Powers, and Grant Youngblood; Steven White. ♦ March 25 at 1:30: The composer Mark Adamo, who scored a hit at City Opera with his version of "Little Women," returns with **"Lysistrata, or the Nude Goddess,"** a wartime comedy freely adapted from the play by Aristophanes. With Emily Pulley, Myrna Paris, Jennifer Rivera, and Chad Shelton; Manahan. ♦ March 26 at 1:30: The season première of **"Don Giovanni,"** with Orla Boylan, Elizabeth Caballero, Yeghishe Manucharyan, Christopher Schaldenbrand, and Robert Gierlach in the leading roles; Steven Mosteller. (New York State Theatre. 212-721-6500.)

NEW YORK GRAND OPERA
Vincent La Selva, New York's invaluable exponent of Italianate style, conducts a free performance of **"Otello,"** Verdi's long-delayed response to the complexities of Wagnerian music drama. Edward Perretti (in the taxing title role), Carmen Zayas, and Raemond Martin lead the cast. (Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew, W. End Ave. at 86th St. March 23 at 7:30. No tickets required.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
Schoenberg's Variations for Orchestra—the major work of his hard-core serialist period—is enjoying an inexplicable banner year: with performances by the Chicago Symphony and the Berlin Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall now past, Lorin Maazel will lead the work, which tests the mettle of even the finest orchestras. Ravel's "La Valse" and Rachmaninoff's "Paganini Rhapsody" (with the elegant young pianist Gabriela Montero, in her Philharmonic début), utterly different works from the same period as the Schoenberg, offer compensation for the perplexed. (March 22-23 at 7:30, March 24 at 2, and March 25 at 8.) (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656.)

BASICALLY BACH FESTIVAL
Richard Westenburg and his Musica Sacra Chorus and Orchestra revive the organization's longtime festival, with a performance of the St. Matthew Passion as its highlight. The vocal soloists include Jennifer Larmore, Mukund Marathe, and Wilbur Pauley (as Jesus). (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. March 22 at 7. For full schedule, see www.musicasacrany.com.)



"Red Tulip, Head On," from 2003, by Lois Dodd, at Alexandre.

NEW YORK COLLEGIUM
Andrew Parrott leads the excellent period-instrument group, with chorus, in works by Telemann ("Thunder Ode") and Handel (Part II of "Alexander's Feast"), with the baritone Thomas Meglioranza and the soprano Tamara Matthews among the soloists. (Church of St. Vincent Ferrer, Lexington Ave. at 66th St. 212-717-9246. March 24 at 8.)

BROOKLYN FRIENDS OF CHAMBER MUSIC: CHAMBER ORCHESTRA KREMLIN
Two repertory nuggets—the Sextet from Strauss's "Capriccio" and Tchaikovsky's Serenade for Strings—bookend new works by Harold Meltzer (the Concerto for Two Bassoons and Strings, featuring Peter Kolkay and Gretha Tuls) and Paul Moravec. (Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church, Lafayette Ave. at S. Oxford St. 718-855-3053. March 26 at 3.)

LONDON PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA
In the second of two concerts, the orchestra comes back to Avery Fisher Hall to perform Schumann's Piano Concerto (with Garrick Ohlsson) and Mahler's First Symphony; Yan Pascal Tortelier conducts. (212-721-6500. March 26 at 3.)

BACH COLLEGIUM JAPAN
Masaaki Suzuki, whose ministrations to Bach's music have won him and his ensemble a worldwide reputation, conducts and plays harpsichord in a concert featuring the Fifth Brandenburg Concerto and the Concerto in D Minor for Two Violins. (Zankel Hall. 212-247-7800. March 27 at 7:30.)

ORPHEUS CHAMBER ORCHESTRA
Evelyn Glennie—virtuoso percussionist, magnetic performer, and frequent commissioner of grateful composers—is the conductorless ensemble's guest for a Scottish-themed program featuring music by James MacMillan ("Veni, Veni Emmanuel"), Peter Maxwell Davies ("An Orkney Wedding, with Sunrise"), and Mendelssohn (the "Scotch" Symphony). (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. March 28 at 8.)

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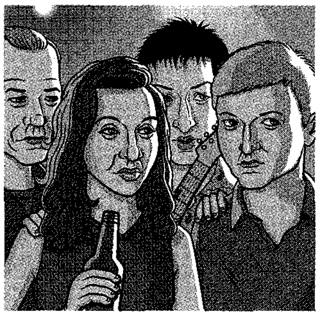
CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
HAVE FAITH

In 1991, a band from Hampstead, England, called Th' Faith Healers played at CBGB's. The band was worrying away at one chord, and the music was so narcotically loud that it felt a little hard to see anything, except for the band's singer, Roxanne Stephen, who put her head down and shook her very long hair in front of her, both hiding her and making her the center of attention. Their songs drew inspiration from older German bands who played the same thing over and over—Can and Neu!—but their sound was not far from the enormous guitar wash of their contemporaries My Bloody Valentine. Th' Faith Healers approached repetition with the faith of a minimalist like Steve Reich, and their music approached the transcendence rock fans like to think they're getting more often than they really do. The band existed for less than five years and didn't build a big enough audience to sustain them, but nobody put on a better loud rock show in the early nineties. This spring, Th' Faith Healers have reunited for a brief tour, and there is every reason to expect that they can still find an entire world in one loud, long chord.
—*Sasha Frere-Jones*



MICHAEL WELDON

RECITALS

PREMIERE COMMISSION, INC.: BRUCE LEVINGSTON
Levingston is a poetic pianist who has a gift for inventive—and glamorous—programming. His annual Alice Tully Hall recital is centered on his friend Philip Glass, who will perform a clutch of his Études for Piano and join Levingston in a duet from his opera "Orphée" and in the finale of "Einstein on the Beach" (with Michael Cunningham and Estelle Parsons reciting the texts). Levingston performs Glass's accompaniment to Allen Ginsberg's poem "Wichita Vortex Sutra" (with Ethan Hawke reciting) in addition to works by Bach, Chopin, Messiaen, and Lisa Bielawa (the world première of "The Lay of the Love and Death"). (212-721-6500. March 22 at 8.)

ANTONIO MENESES: "BACH MEETS BRAZIL"
The Beaux Arts Trio cellist (and native Brazilian) offers a recital at the Americas Society mixing three of the Bach solo suites with new works commissioned to be heard along with them (by Marlos Nobre, Almeida Prado, and Marco Padilha). (680 Park Ave. March 23 at 7. For free tickets, which are required, call 212-277-8359.)

BARGEMUSIC
March 23-24 at 7:30: An evening of works by Scarlatti (a quartet of sonatas), Schumann ("Kreisleriana"), Brahms, and Grieg, offered by the pianist Racha Arodaky. ♦ March 25 at 7:30 and March 26 at 4: The violinist Mark Peskanov and the cellist Frederick Zlotkin join Arodaky for a program of music by Mozart, Beethoven (the "Moonlight" Sonata), and Mendelssohn (the Trio No. 2 in C Minor). (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. 718-624-2083.)

MUSIC AT THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
March 23 at 8: "Piano Forte," the Museum's annual piano series, closes with a recital by the Ukrainian pianist Alexei Grynyuk, who offers works by Chopin (such as the Scherzo No. 3 and the Three Mazurkas, Op. 56) and Rachmaninoff (including the mammoth Sonata No. 2, Op. 36). ♦ March 24 at 8: The dynamic young Metropolitan Museum Artists in Concert, led by the cellist Edward Arron, tucks Webern's famously recondite String Trio into a concert featuring such favorites as Brahms's Waltzes, Op. 39 (a selection), and Schoenberg's "Verklärte Nacht." (Fifth Ave. at 83rd St. 212-570-3949.)

KRONOS QUARTET: "LIVE MIX"
March 24 at 7:30: "Songs Are Sung," an evening of new works by Alexandra DuBois, Michael Gordon, and Henryk Górecki (the Third String Quartet). ♦ March 25 at 7:30: "Alternative Radio: Music in a Time of War," an unconventional concert in which the group will choose works in response to a running conversation between David Barsamian and the left-wing historian Howard Zinn. Music by two collaborators, the Inuit throat singer Tanya Tagaq and the Tanzanian Phonoharp player Walter Kitundu, is sure to be included. ♦ March 26 at 7:30: In "Notes from Azerbaijan," the composer-pianist Franghiz Ali-Zadeh—one of the quartet's best friends—joins the group in a program featuring her music and works by Rahman Asadollahi. (Zankel Hall. 212-247-7800.)

MUSIC BY MAGNUS LINDBERG
In the last of Miller Theatre's "Composer Portraits" series, the International Contemporary Ensemble performs a selection of the Finnish composer's works (including the Clarinet Quintet and "Related Rocks"), renowned for their bristling energy and glowing colors. (Columbia University, Broadway at 116th St. 212-854-7799. March 24 at 8.)

AMERICAN FESTIVAL OF MICROTONAL MUSIC
Johnny Reinhard, the bassoonist and zealous advocate for "just intonation," likes to arrange concerts featuring both new works and repertory masterpieces that can be heard anew. The Kirnberger III tuning system rules the first of two spring concerts, featuring not only Tui St. George Tucker's Second Sonata for Alto Recorder but also works by Brahms (the Clarinet Sonata in F Minor) and Beethoven (the "Moonlight" Sonata, performed by the pianist Joshua Pierce). (Church of St. Luke in the Fields, Hudson St. at Grove St. March 25 at 8. Tickets at the door.)

ALLIANCE PLAYERS: "WAGNER THE CONTEMPORARY"
Wagner, not known as a chamber-music composer, is getting a good look this spring from the violinist Nurit Pacht's ensemble, in residence at the French Institute Alliance Française. Their latest concert explores music by several of the composer's besotted French groupies, including Fauré, Chabrier, and Chausson (the diaphanous "Chanson Perpetuelle" and quasi-symphonic Concert for Violin, Piano, and String Quartet). The pianists Ursula Oppens and Jerome Lowenthal help out. (Florence Gould Hall, 55 E. 59th St. 212-307-4100. March 27 at 8.)

MOVIES OPENING

AMERICAN GUN
A drama, directed by Aric Avelino, about people whose lives are affected by firearms. Starring Donald Sutherland and Marcia Gay Harden. Opening March 22. (Sunshine Cinema.)

THE BEAUTY ACADEMY OF KABUL
A documentary, directed by Liz Mermin, about a group of American women who open a school for beauticians in Afghanistan. Opening March 24. (Angelika Film Center.)

L'ENFANT (THE CHILD)
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. In French. Opening March 24. (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas and Quad Cinema.)

INSIDE MAN
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening March 24. (In wide release.)

LONESOME JIM
Steve Buscemi directed this drama, starring Casey Affleck and Liv Tyler, about a twenty-seven-year-old man who moves back in with his parents. Opening March 24. (First & 62nd Cinemas and IFC Center.)

MARDI GRAS: MADE IN CHINA
A documentary, directed by David Redmon, about the production of Mardi Gras beads by workers in China. Opening March 24. (Cinema Village.)

STAY ALIVE
A horror movie, directed by William Brent Bell, about an online game that kills teen-agers. Opening March 24. (In wide release.)

STONED
A drama based on the life of Brian Jones, of the Rolling Stones. Directed by Stephen Woolley. Opening March 24. (Sunshine Cinema.)

SUMMER STORM
A drama, directed by Marco Kreuzpaintner, about the love lives of two rowers on a crew. In German. Opening March 24. (Village East Cinemas.)

NOW PLAYING

THE BEGUILED
In Don Siegel's gothic Civil War Western, from 1971, a wounded Union soldier (Clint Eastwood) plants a slow and tender kiss on the lips of the twelve-year-old girl who rescues him, and she likes it. He is given shelter in her small, rural Mississippi girls' school, where the middle-aged Miss Martha Farnsworth (Geraldine Page) teaches the ladylike virtues that quickly go to the wind in the presence of a virile man. Teacher and students alike pant after the strong but soft-spoken enemy, and their jealousy and pride lead to horrific spasms of violence that Siegel plays for shock value. His direction tends toward the expressionistic; distorted views, subjective angles, and echoing voice-overs seek to burrow deep into the characters' lust-crazed consciousness. The story may sometimes come off as a ribald soldiers' tale that Siegel, born in 1912,

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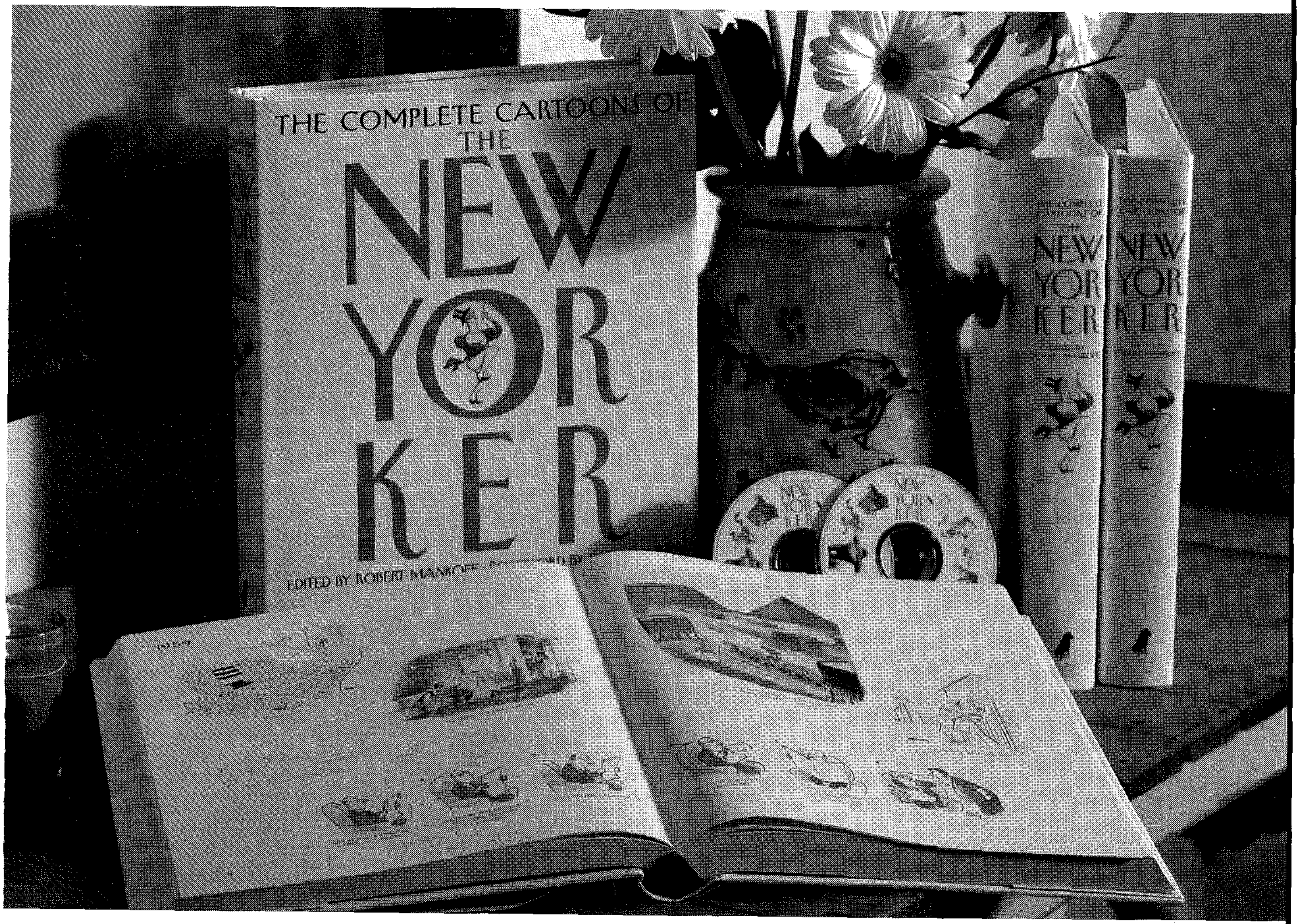

THE COMPLETE CARTOONS OF THE NEW YORKER
EDITED BY ROBERT MANKOFF

THE COMPLETE CARTOONS OF THE NEW YORKER

A decade-by-decade compendium including a book with more than 2,000 cartoons and two CDs with 68,647 cartoons published in the magazine from February, 1925, through February, 2004.

Edited by Robert Mankoff
Foreword by David Remnick

With essays by Roger Angell, Nancy Franklin, Ian Frazier, Rebecca Mead, Lillian Ross, Mark Singer, Calvin Trillin, and John Updike.

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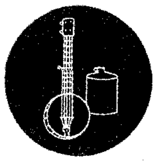


POP NOTES
HONOR THY COUNTRY

The Little Willies are a New York band whose début record, also named **“The Little Willies,”** (Milking Bull/EMI), consists of nine covers of country-music standards and four original songs. One of the band’s vocalists is the singer and pianist Norah Jones; the rest of the members are musicians Jones was friends with as she was becoming famous. Though commercial considerations clearly favor giving Jones top billing, all descriptions of the band insist that it is a democratic enterprise. Sadly, democracy does not always work. The record doesn’t start badly. The sprightly opener, a cover of the Bob Wills chestnut “Roly Poly,” could have been on a Dan Hicks record in the early seventies. It’s well played, amiable enough, and not without kitsch value, much like the original. But then good taste arrives to ruin the party. The second song, Hank Williams’s gallows-humor classic “I’ll Never Get Out of This World Alive,” is a perfect illustration. The singer, Richard Julian, chooses a low-key approach to the lyrics. The result is that there’s not a drop of actual suffering left in the thing; Julian sounds like he’s upset because he forgot to tape “The Sopranos.” On Elvis’s “Love Me,” Jones’s vocal is leached of all melodrama, and the band’s unwrinkled rendition of Gram Parsons’s “Streets of Baltimore” may please that city’s chamber of commerce, but it will not please listeners. It is easy to say that this is a well-intentioned enterprise executed too slickly, but it’s not even all that well intentioned. The notion that country music needs a boost from pop outsiders is vaguely insulting, as is the notion that country is best represented by the canon. Contemporary commercial country, from Brad Paisley to Julie Roberts, is doing just fine.

Less otiose, by far, is the new album by Van Morrison, **“Pay the Devil”** (Lost Highway). Early in Morrison’s career, he was a genre to himself, combining rock, jazz, country, blues, and soul with brilliant results. Lately, he’s been separating out, releasing a blues album here, a jazz album there. “Pay the Devil” features twelve covers and three new songs written in the style of classic country. The covers are a mix of the too familiar (“Your Cheating Heart”) and the pleasantly obscure (“Big Blue Diamonds”), and the treatment is respectful while still highly personal; Morrison is expert at conveying pain, confusion, and defiance, sometimes all at once. Although the record is hardly a major entry in Morrison’s catalogue, it’s consistently credible, and sometimes—as in the opener, a cover of Webb Pierce’s “There Stands the Glass,” or in a mournful version of Rodney Crowell’s “Till I Gain Control Again”—much more.

—*Ben Greenman*

had been awaiting a sexual revolution to tell; still, his intense, intelligent breakdown of the film’s wild outbursts reveals subtleties of love, despair, and shame beneath the schematic luridness.—*Richard Brody* (Film Forum; March 22-23.)

DON’T TELL

Several of Italy’s top young actors populate this Italian drama about the lingering, paralyzing effects of repressed memory. Sabina, played by the beautiful, liquid-eyed Giovanna Mezzogiorno, is troubled by anxieties she can’t explain and tormented by enigmatic nightmares about her childhood. She can’t speak of her fears to her adoring and equally beautiful actor boyfriend (Alessio Boni) or to her smitten childhood friend Emilia (the glum, reed-thin Stefania Rocca), so she reaches out to her brother (Luigi Lo Cascio), a university professor in the U.S. whose remoteness is well suited to his chosen home: the forbidding, obsessively neoclassical Charlottesville, Virginia. Cristina Comencini, who wrote and directed the film, may overdo the drama at times, but this excess is made up for by the richness of the performances and Comencini’s imaginative way of making locations seem pregnant with meaning. In Italian.—*Marina Harss* (Sunshine Cinema.)

FAILURE TO LAUNCH

A slightly amusing romantic comedy about a slacker Lothario (Matthew McConaughey) whose parents hire a woman (Sarah Jessica Parker) to bamboozle him out of their house. The movie has a vaguely screwball atmosphere, with the two leads wittily bickering and bantering, and a supporting cast (Zooey Deschanel and Kathy Bates, among others) that performs the proper bits of funny business. The director, Tom Dey, keeps things moving briskly, but the movie is such a well-worn routine that it never comes to life.—*Bruce Diones* (In wide release.)

THE HEART IS DECEITFUL ABOVE ALL THINGS

Asia Argento directed, and stars in, this adaptation of J. T. LeRoy’s book of the same name. The seven-year-old hero, Jeremiah (Jimmy Bennett), has been brought from a loving foster home to the half-empty apartment of his mother, Sarah (Argento), who takes drugs and turns tricks for a living. The rest of the film is a dutiful course in degradation, complete with a roster of villains as well established as those of any soap opera. As an actress, Argento has not advanced to a significant degree since her ballsy turn opposite Vin Diesel in “XXX.” As a director, she has a tendency to play leapfrog with the narrative at the exact moment when it threatens to hold our interest. This is a shame, because when Argento does stop to consider the changes that humans slowly wreak on one another, she can reach beyond the gross to a damaged sadness that many filmmakers would prefer not to ponder.—*Anthony Lane* (3/13/06) (Sunshine Cinema.)

THE SHAGGY DOG

This bland but fast-moving children’s comedy is dominated by its oddly tendentious backstory. The three-hundred-year-old Dog of Ageless Wonder, which Tibetan monks treat as holy, is kidnapped by agents of an American pharmaceutical company, where a craven scientist (Robert Downey, Jr.) is seeking the serum of eternal youth, but a teen-age animal-rights activist, Carly (Zena Grey), springs the dog from the lab and brings it home to her family. When the animal bites her father, Dave (Tim Allen)—a prosecutor who has put one of her fellow-activists on trial—its “viralized” gene structure turns him into a dog that is nonetheless endowed with Dave’s own consciousness. Predictably, the dog’s-eye view helps Dave to confront his failings as a man. Less expectedly, Dave’s humanity is restored by a collective meditation that closely resembles prayer: in the laboratory, science has intruded not only on the mysteries of nature (as in classic science fiction) but on the prerogatives of faith.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

STREETWISE

Nine urban teen-age runaways in Seattle get a charge from being on their own that may be worth all the danger and fear, even if outsiders may think they’ve won only a sham freedom, bounded by three or four city blocks and their own arrested emotions. The director and cinematographer of this documentary, from 1984, Martin Bell, captures the spontaneous combustion of the streets and the creeping horror of the home lives that drove some of these kids out in the first place. Seeking a dramatic truth that’s comparable to fiction, Bell shifts among the characters’ points of view and adds soundtrack narration that the kids provided later. But these techniques don’t imbue the movie with the emotional authority of fiction: throughout the film you feel you’re being led from dramatic high point to dramatic high point (and often from moral low point to moral low point). The punchy approach ends up mirroring the kids’ melodramatic fantasy of the streets as a cheap, exciting cavalcade. Still, it’s an ambitious, engrossing attempt to mold real-life events into a tragicomedy of lost American youth.—*Michael Sragow* (Walter Reade Theatre; March 27.)

THANK YOU FOR SMOKING

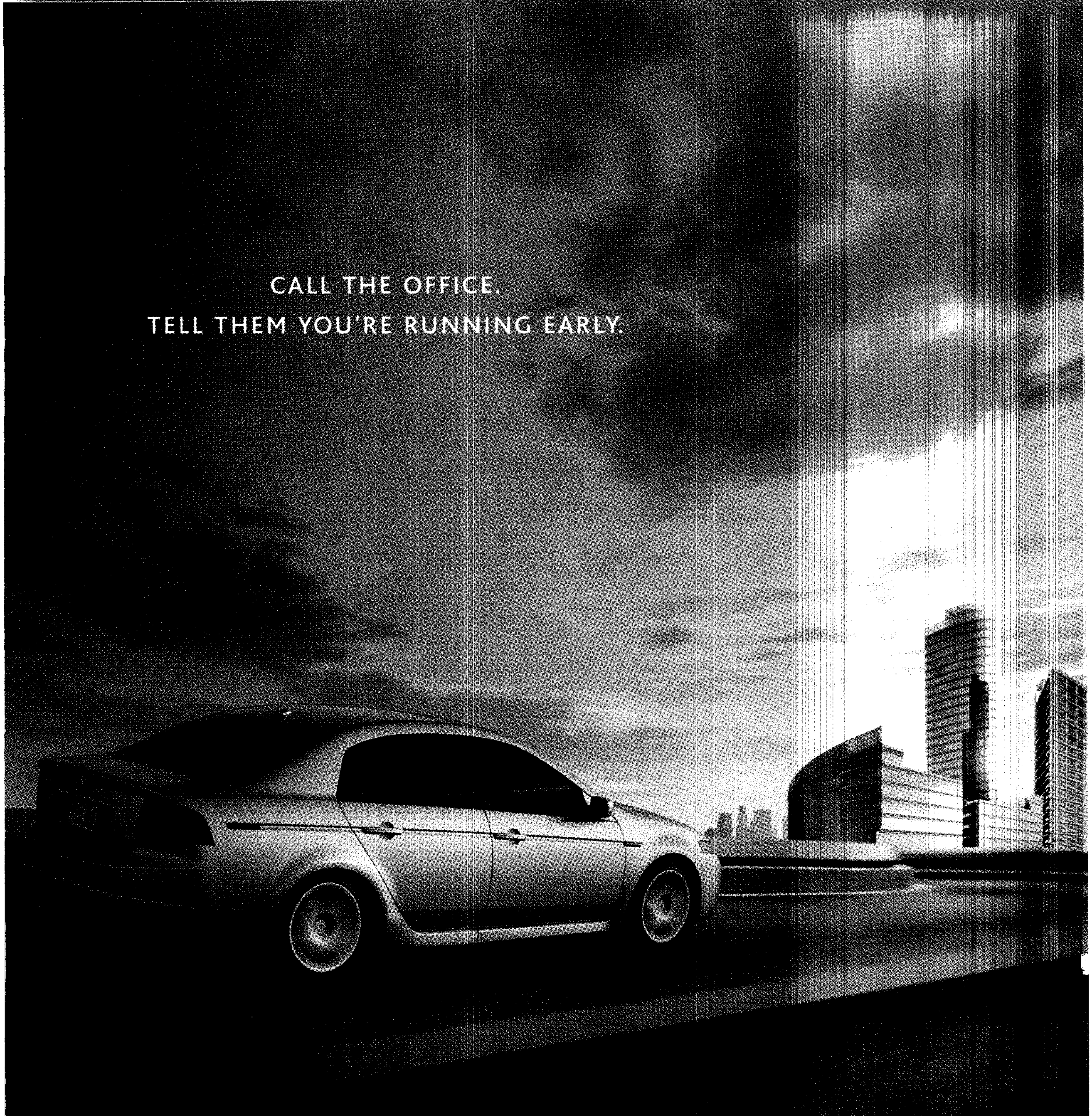
Nick Naylor (Aaron Eckhart), the chief spokesman for the tobacco lobby in Washington, is handsome and likable, a mixture of swagger and impudent candor. Nick knows that his arguments in favor of smoking are rubbish, but he enjoys the game of spin too much to give it up. This shrewdly entertaining satirical comedy, adapted by Jason Reitman (son of the veteran director Ivan Reitman) from Christopher Buckley’s 1994 novel, loves the brazen moxie of “sin” lobbyists without being fooled by them. The comic highlight of the movie is the regular lunch sessions that Nick holds with the lobbyists for the alcohol and firearms industries (Maria Bello and David Koechner)—the three of them, boasting of the lethality of their respective clients, might be doing a recurring skit on “Saturday Night Live.” When Nick gets written up by a seductive reporter (Katie Holmes) from the Washington *Probe*, his life goes into a tailspin. With Cameron Bright as Nick’s adoring son, J. K. Simmons and Robert Duvall as tobacco executives, Rob Lowe and Adam Brody as glib Hollywood types, and William H. Macy as a sanctimonious anti-smoking senator from Vermont who has a collection of maple-syrup bottles in his office. Reitman’s direction is fast-moving and witty; the movie is a winner.—*David Denby* (In wide release.)

TRIPLE AGENT

Eric Rohmer constructed his latest film, from 2004, on his old theme: the danger of falling for a false love while awaiting a real one. Here the plot (loosely based on real events) unfolds in the Russian-émigré milieu of Paris in the nineteen-thirties: the elegant Fyodor Voronin (Serge Renko), a former Russian general in exile, spreads rumors and foments intrigue in diplomatic and journalistic circles in order to create an illusion of power that he hopes to make a reality. Among the factions competing for his fealty are the Communists, the Nazis, and his own wife, Arsinoé (Katerina Didaskalou), a Greek artist whose forthright political morality makes her an unreliable partner in his Machiavellian games. A secret Sadean, Rohmer keeps the titanic and bloody struggle of epochal forces under the tight bonds of diplomatic and domestic decorum, but just beneath the surfaces of his characters’ formality—and of his images’ taut precision—lurk the political depravities and intimate furies that bring the couple’s story, and Europe’s, to the same unbearable conclusion. In French, Russian, and German.—*R.B.* (Thalia Theatre; March 26 and March 28.)

V FOR VENDETTA

A dunderheaded pop fantasia that celebrates terrorism and destruction. The graphic-novel creators Alan Moore and David Lloyd conceived the material in the nineteen-eighties during the reign of Margaret Thatcher. Setting their work in 1997, they projected a fascist future for England and a rebel hero—a terrorist in a Guy Fawkes mask who blows up the Parliament buildings and the Prime Minister’s residence. The producer, Joel Silver, and the Wachowskis, Larry and Andy, grafted references to the current condition of warfare and fear onto this template, lifting details out of Orwell’s “1984” and a variety of pop myths. Hugo Weaving is the caped and masked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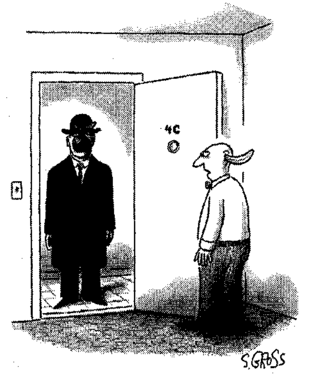

"Oh, it's you."

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man who kills and blows things up; Natalie Portman is the innocent who becomes his victim and his follower. The movie has some visual life to it, but it's so foolish that you come out shaking your head. Among other things, the ineptitude of "Vendetta" suggests that pop isn't a very good mode for political allegory. With Stephen Rea. Directed by the Wachowski brothers' protégé, James McTeigue.—*D.D.* (3/20/06) (In wide release.)

Also Playing

CRASH: In wide release. **RUNNING SCARED:** In wide release. **SHE'S THE MAN:** In wide release. **16 BLOCKS:** In wide release.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES
32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (212-505-5181)—"NewFilmmakers." March 22 at 7: A short-film program. ♦ March 22 at 8: Films by new Latino filmmakers. ♦ The films of Takamine Go. All films are in Okinawan and Japanese, except where noted. March 22 at 8: "Okinawan Chirudai" (1976). ♦ March 23 at 8: "Paradise View" (1985). ♦ March 24 at 8: "Untama Giru" (1989; in Okinawan, Japanese, and English). ♦ March 25 at 4: "Private Images of Ryukyu: JM" (1996-2005). ♦ March 25 at 8: "Okinawan Dream Show" (1974; silent). ♦ March 26 at 6: "Kadekaru Rinsho: Songs and Stories" (1994; no subtitles) and "Dear Photograph" (1973; silent). ♦ March 26 at 8: "Tsuru-Henry" (1998; in Okinawan, Japanese, English, and Taiwanese). ♦ "The *Onion* Presents." March 23 at 8: "Zero Effect" (1998, Jake Kasdan). ♦ Special screenings. March 24-25 at 7 and 9: "Come Back, Africa" (1959, Lionel Rogosin). ♦ March 26 at 5 and 8: "Pioneers of Animation: Early Treasures from the Eastman House." ♦ March 28 at 7:30: "Corridor X" (2006, Angela Melitopoulos).

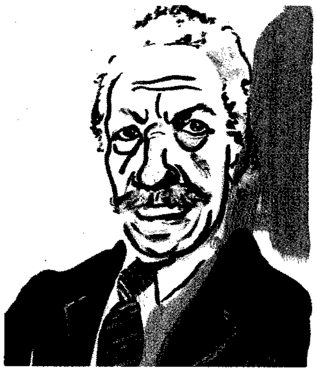
BAM ROSE CINEMAS
30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-636-4100)—"Some Kind of Horror Show." March 22 at 7:30: "Twisted Nerve" (1968, Roy Boulting), followed by a discussion with Elliott Stein. ♦ March 28 at 6 and 9: "Demon Pond" (1979, Masahiro Shinoda; in Japanese). ♦ "Mark Morris & Movies." March 23 at 7: "Greed" (1924, Erich von Stroheim; silent). ♦ March 24 at 2, 4:30, 6:50, and 9:15: "Cabin in the Sky" (1943, Vincente Minnelli). The 6:50 show will be introduced by Morris. ♦ March 25 at 2, 5:30, and 9: "Nashville" (1975, Robert Altman). ♦ March 26 at 2, 4:30, 6:50, and 9:15: "The 5,000 Fingers of Dr. T" (1953, Roy Rowland). ♦ March 27 at 6:50 and 9:30: "Martin" (1977, George A. Romero). The 6:50 show will be introduced by Morris.

FILM FORUM
W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—Through April 13: The films of Don Siegel. March 22-23 at 1, 5:20, and 9:40: "Two Mules for Sister Sara" (1970). ♦ March 22-23 at 3:10 and 7:30: "The Beguiled" (†). ♦ March 24-26 at 1:30, 3:10, 4:50, 6:30, 8:10, and 9:50 and March 27 at 1:30, 3:10, and 4:50: "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" (1956). ♦ March 28 at 1, 4:30, and 8: "Flaming Star" (1960). ♦ March 28 at 2:50, 6:20, and 9:50: "Edge of Eternity" (1959). ♦ Special event. March 27 at 8:10: "An Evening with James Sheldon, TV Pioneer."

FLORENCE GOULD HALL
55 E. 59th St. (212-355-6160)—Special screening. March 24 at 7: "Tenth District Court" (2004, Raymond Depardon; in French). ♦ "CinémaTuesdays." March 28 at 12:30, 4, and 7: "Nathalie" (2003, Anne Fontaine; in French).

IFC CENTER
323 Sixth Ave., at W. 3rd St. (212-924-7771)—"Weekend Classics." March 24-26 at noon: "Ran" (1985, Akira Kurosawa; in Japanese). ♦ "Waverly Midnights." March 24-25 at midnight: "Blacula" (1972, William Crain). ♦ "Stranger Than Fiction." March 28 at 7:30: "Jane" (1962, D. A. Pennebaker, Hope Ryden, and Richard Leacock), introduced by Pennebaker and Ryden.

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
THROUGH A LENS



Years ago, the filmmaker, photographer, and memoirist Gordon Parks published a piece about the great American artist Duke Ellington. In his brilliant essay, Parks—who was born in 1912 and died earlier this month—imparted a lyrical understanding of the maestro's flash, loneliness, and joy. And why shouldn't he? As an equally protean talent, Parks knew something about elegance, and the grit it takes for a black man to maintain his cool in a racially embattled America. Of course, Parks conveyed something of that style and its underlying tension in his best work, which always took the black male—as object of derision, sexual fascination, or artistic greatness—as its central focus. His autobiographical film, "The Learning Tree," was the first movie by a black director to be financed by a Hollywood studio. "Leadbelly," his bio-pic about the legendary blues musician, has a truly sexy and liberated black character. But it was "Shaft" where Parksian cool reached its apex. The famous theme-song lyric—"Shaft is a bad mother!"—describes not only the title character but Gordon Parks himself.

—*Hilton Als*

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9480)—Through April 2: "New Directors/New Films." March 22 at 6: "Half Nelson" (2006, Ryan Fleck). ♦ March 22 at 9: "The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros" (2006, Auraeus Solito; in English, Filipino, and Tagalog). ♦ March 23 at 6: "October 17, 1961" (2005, Alain Tasma; in French and Arabic). ♦ March 23 at 8:45: "Look Both Ways" (2005, Sarah Watt). ♦ March 24 at 6: "Quinceañera" (2006, Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland). ♦ March 24 at 8:30: "Cavite" (2005, Ian Gamazon and Neill Dela Llana; in English, Filipino, and Tagalog). ♦ March 25 at 3: "Iceberg" (2005, Dominique Abel, Fiona Gordon, and Bruno Romy; in French). ♦ March 25 at 5:45: "Sangre" (2005, Amat Escalante; in Spanish). ♦ March 25 at 8:30: "A Soap" (2006, Pernille Fischer Christensen; in Danish). ♦ March 26 at 3:30: "Man Push Cart" (2005, Ramin Bahrani; in English and Urdu). ♦ March 26 at 6: "Eleven Men Out" (2005, Róbert I. Douglas; in Icelandic). ♦ March 27 at 6: "John & Jane Toll-Free" (2005, Ashim Ahluwalia). ♦ March 27 at 8:30: "In Bed" (2005, Matías Bize; in Spanish).

MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE
35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—Films featuring Anna May Wong. March 24 at 7:30 and March 25-26 at 6:30: "Shanghai Express" (1932, Josef von Sternberg). ♦ March 25-26 at 2: "The Flame of Love" (1930, Richard Eichberg). ♦ March 25-26 at 4:30: "Daughter of the Dragon" (1931, Lloyd Corrigan). ♦ Beastie Boys preview screening at the 34th Street Theatre, 312 W. 34th St.: "Awesome; I Fuckin' Shot That!" (2006, Adam Yauch). For tickets, call 718-784-4520.

PIONEER THEATRE
155 E. 3rd St. (212-591-0434)—In revival. March 22 at 6:30: "Gloria" (1980, John Cassavetes). ♦ Premières. March 22 at 9: "Hate Crime" (2005, Tommy Stovall). ♦ March 24 at 7: "Keep Not Silent" (2004, Ilil Alexander). ♦ "Sci-Fi Springtime." March 23 and March 27 at 6:30: "No One's Watching: An Alien Abductee's Story" (2006, Jeremy Vaeni), introduced by the director. ♦ March 23-28 at 9: "Puzzlehead" (2005, James Bai). ♦ March 24-25 at 10:45: "Primer" (2004, Shane Carruth). ♦ March 24-25 at 12:15 A.M.: "Muppets from Space" (1999, Tim Hill). ♦ March 25 at 6: "Secrets of the Shadow World" (1999, George Kuchar). ♦ March 26 at 3: "Solaris" (1972, Andrei Tarkovsky; in Russian). ♦ March 26 at 6:45: "Lifeforce" (1985, Tobe Hooper). ♦ "Cinewomen NY." March 28 at 7: "The Art of Love and Struggle" (2006, Jessica Habie).

SUNSHINE CINEMA
143 E. Houston St. (212-330-8182)—"Sunshine@Midnight." March 24-25: "The NeverEnding Story" (1984, Wolfgang Petersen).

THALIA THEATRE
Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. (212-864-5400)—Special screenings. March 26 at 2 and March 28 at 6: "The Conformist" (1970, Bernardo Bertolucci; in Italian). ♦ March 26 at 4:45 and March 28 at 8:45: "Triple Agent" (†).

WALTER READE THEATRE
Lincoln Center (212-875-5600)—Through April 2: "New Directors/New Films." March 23 at 6 and March 25 at 1: "The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros" (2006, Auraeus Solito; in English, Filipino, and Tagalog). ♦ March 23 at 8:45 and March 25 at 3:45: "Half Nelson" (2006, Ryan Fleck). ♦ March 24 at 6 : "Iceberg" (2005, Dominique Abel, Fiona Gordon, and Bruno Romy; in French). ♦ March 24 at 8:45: "October 17, 1961" (2005, Alain Tasma; in French and Arabic). ♦ March 25 at 6:30: "Man Push Cart" (2005, Ramin Bahrani; in English and Urdu). ♦ March 25 at 9: "Quinceañera" (2006, Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland). ♦ March 26 at 3: "Cavite" (2005, Ian Gamazon and Neill Dela Llana; in English, Filipino, and Tagalog). ♦ March 26 at 5:30: "Look Both Ways" (2005, Sarah Watt). ♦ March 26 at 8:15: "Sangre" (2005, Amat Escalante; in Spanish). ♦ March 27 at 6: "A Soap" (2006, Pernille Fischer Christensen; in Danish). ♦ March 27 at 8:45: "Old Joy" (2006, Kelly Reichardt). ♦ March 28 at 6: "Iron Island" (2005, Mohammad Rasoulof; in Farsi). ♦ March

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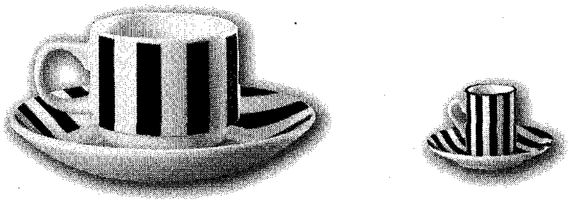

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28 at 8:30: "In Bed" (2005, Matías Bize; in Spanish). ♦ Through March 31: "New Directors/New Films Classics." March 27 at 1:30: "H-2 Worker" (1990, Stephanie Black), introduced by the director. ♦ March 27 at 3:15: "Streetwise" (†), introduced by the director, Martin Bell. ♦ March 28 at 1: "Sound and Fury" (1999, Josh Aronson), introduced by the director. ♦ March 28 at 3: "The Eyes of Tammy Faye" (1999, Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato).

READINGS AND TALKS

NATIONAL ARTS CLUB
Readings by Bruce Benderson ("The Romanian: Story of an Obsession"), Dana Spiotta ("Eat the Document"), and Eyal Press ("Absolute Convictions: My Father, a City, and the Conflict That Divided America"). (15 Gramercy Park S. No tickets necessary. March 22 at 7.)

"READINGS ON THE FOURTH FLOOR"
Four Brooklyn-based illustrators—Betsy Lewin, Ted Lewin, Brian Selznick, and Mo Willems—who have all won Caldecott Honors for their children's books, talk about their work. (P.S. 107, 1301 Eighth Ave., between 13th and 14th Sts., Park Slope, Brooklyn. For more information, call 718-783-3075. March 23 at 7:30.)

GOING COASTAL
The nonprofit group, which is dedicated to the appreciation and preservation of the local urban shore, and which recently republished the 1941 W.P.A. book "A Maritime History of New York," presents a panel discussion about New York Harbor's past, present, and future, with Barbara La Rocco, the president of Going Coastal, Maria Burks, the Commissioner of the National Parks of New York Harbor, the historian Robert McGaughey, and various trade writers, sea captains, and shipping experts. Sea chanteys will also be performed. (Gateway National Recreation Area, Fort Wadsworth, Staten Island. For more information, call 718-354-4500. March 26 at noon.)

QUINCY TROUPE
The poet reads from his work at a benefit for the Community-Word Project, a nonprofit organization that puts artists, writers, and performers in yearlong residencies in inner-city schools. Troupe will be joined by students from these schools, and there will be a silent auction of works by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, among other artists. (National Arts Club, 15 Gramercy Park S. For more information, call 212-962-3820. March 27 at 6.)

JOHN CURRIN
The painter inaugurates a series of talks organized by the Public Art Fund. (New School, 66 W. 12th St. For more information, call 212-980-4575. March 28 at 6:30.)

A TRIBUTE TO NINA CASSIAN
The Romanian poet, composer, and critic reads from her work and is honored by Jill Bialosky, Maurice Edwards, Carmen Firan, Naomi Lazard, Elizabeth Macklin, Stanley Moss, and Gerald Stern. (National Arts Club, 15 Gramercy Park S. For more information, call 212-254-9628. March 28 at 7:30.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

RINGLING BROS. AND BARNUM & BAILEY
The Greatest Show on Earth sets down at Madison Square Garden starting March 23. Expect elephants, clowns, animal tricks, and acrobats, but not the three-ring setup—the hundred-and-thirty-sixth edition of the circus dispenses with tradition and embraces new technology, including a giant video screen that will augment the story line. (212-307-7171. Through April 17.)

"CROSSING NEWTOWN CREEK"
The Brooklyn Center for the Urban Environment presents a walk across the Pulaski Bridge and through industrialized portions of Brooklyn and Queens. (For more information, call 718-788-8500, ext. 208. March 26 at 1.)

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES
Christie's leads up to its weeklong rendezvous with Asian art with a two-part sale of Japanese and Korean pieces (March 28), which features a private collection of Korean ceramics, paintings, and bronzes, as well as a selection of swords from the Metropolitan Museum, several full sets of Edo-period armor, and a ravishing pair of seventeenth-century screens, depicting a luxurious pleasure house, painted in richly colored inks and sprinkled with silver and gold leaf. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.) ♦ **Sotheby's** kicks off its own Asian tour with a private collection of Tibetan and Nepalese paintings (March 28), including a large selection of *thangkas* (works on cloth), the most significant of which is a thirteenth-century portrait of a Tibetan Buddhist master set against a background of stylized mountains. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.) ♦ Like a time capsule, the coin-and-medal collection of the Hawaiian land baron and financier Samuel Mills Damon—a finance minister during the reign of King Kalakaua, when Hawaii was still a monarchy—has sat in a bank vault for eight decades, since Damon's death, safe from scrapes and scuffs. Now his estate is being dissolved, and the collection, which includes a very valuable set of fourteen collectors' coins from the U.S. centennial year and an extremely rare Kingdom of Hawaii ten-dollar bill from 1880, is going up for sale at **Doyle** on March 23. (175 E. 87th St. 212-427-2730.)

JASHAR AWAN

ON THE HORIZON

MOVIES
PITCH MEETINGS
April 3-30

On Opening Day for the Mets and the Yankees, MOMA begins a month of baseball movies. In the lineup with "Cobb," "Bull Durham," and "The Natural" are Hank Greenberg (in Aviva Kempner's 2003 documentary about the Jewish slugger), Jackie Robinson (starring in "The Jackie Robinson Story," from 1950), and Babe Ruth, who stars in his bio-pic "Headin' Home," from 1920. (212-708-9400.)

READINGS AND TALKS
BETTER OR VERSE
April 17

April is National Poetry Month, and among the events planned is a fiftieth-anniversary celebration of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl." Mark Doty, Margo Jefferson, Philip Lopate, and others will talk about the poem's influence and read from it at Miller Theatre. (212-854-7799.)

NIGHT LIFE
IT'S ALL GOOD
April 20-23

The Jammys, the annual jam-band awards show at the Theatre at Madison Square Garden, kicks off a new multi-venue party called the Green Apple Music & Arts Festival in honor of Earth Day. (www.greenapplemusicfestival.com.)

ART
GILDING THE LILY
April 27-June 24

Three gallerists with six spaces among them are joining forces to present a survey of work by James Lee Byars (1932-97). For those whose appetites were whetted by the Whitney's retrospective last year, this will be an opportunity to see pieces such as his gold-leaf sculpture "The Spinning Oracle at Delphi." At three locations: Mary Boone (212-752-2929), Perry Rubenstein (212-627-8000), and Michael Werner (212-988-1623) galleries, with staggered openings.

CLASSICAL MUSIC
SHARED WEALTH
May 10-13

The cellist Yo-Yo Ma will share the Philharmonic stage with three young artists (the violinists Colin Jacobsen and Jonathan Gandelsman and the pianist Joel Fan) in Beethoven's Triple Concerto and Brahms's Double Concerto. (212-875-5656.)

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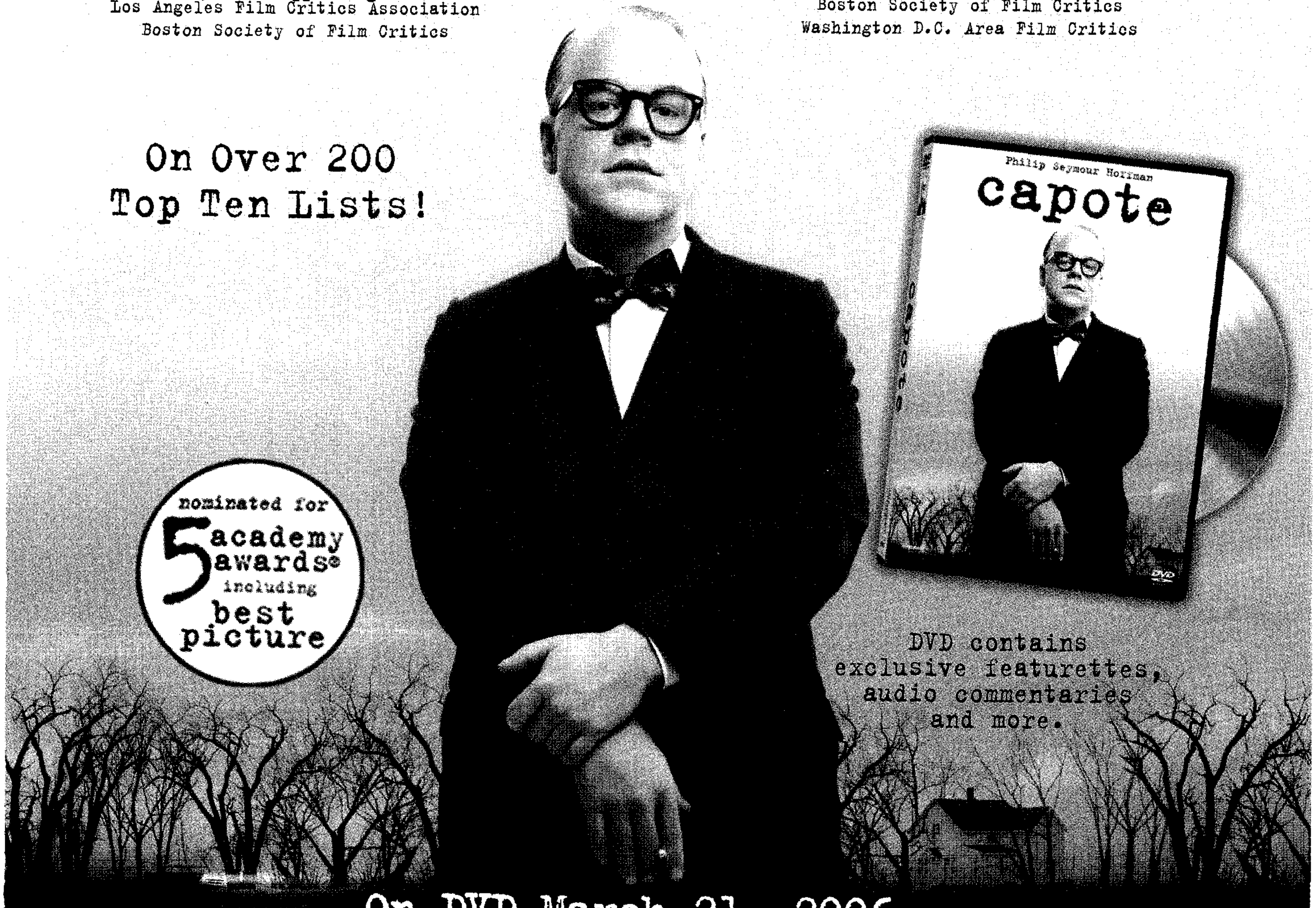

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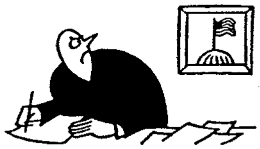
THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

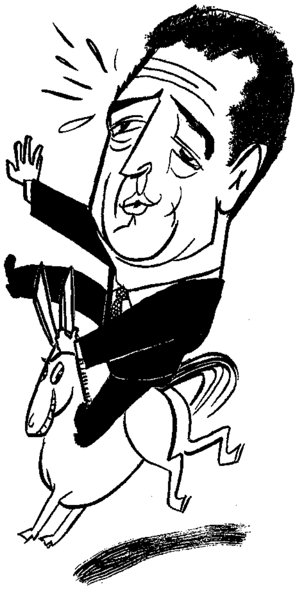
COMMENT
DISARRAY THIS



The Democrats are in disarray. Everybody says so. In the *Times*, Adam Nagourney, the paper's chief political correspondent, indicts them for sending "scattershot messages," having no "overarching theme," and lacking "a strategy for governing." In the *Daily News*, Michael Goodwin dismisses them as "more of a collection of disparate interest groups than people united around a political philosophy." In the Washington *Post*, Shailagh Murray and Charles Babington point to "the failure of congressional leaders to deliver a clear message" and note that, after months of meetings and focus groups aimed at finding a slogan for the midterm elections, the best they could come up with was the ungrammatical—and, frankly, pathetic—"Together, America Can Do Better."

The Democrats are in disarray. Everybody says so; some even sing so. A week ago, at the Gridiron Club dinner—that's the annual white-tie event where Washington's most élite politicians and journalists kid each other and themselves in an atmosphere dank with chumminess—a Marine Corps singer impersonating a Democratic bigwig belted out this chorus: "What do we stand for? We don't know. What's our platform? We ain't sure." The designated jokester from the Democratic side was Barack Obama, the freshman senator from Illinois. "You hear this constant refrain from our critics that Democrats don't stand for anything," he said. "That's really unfair. We *do* stand for anything." And although most of the evening's material, inescapably, concerned Dick Cheney's shotgun, the Associated Press noted that "Democrats didn't have an easier time, as they were mocked for being in disarray over the party's message and strategy, its position on the Iraq war and even whom to field for president in 2008."

Last week's disarray display was touched off by Russ Feingold, the maverick senator from Wisconsin, who, on Monday, introduced a resolution to censure President Bush for his program of warrantless electronic surveillance. Censure is a purely symbolic form of punishment. Though it carries no concrete penalties, the shame of it has a certain Roman gravity. The Senate has voted nine times to censure one of its own errant members—most notably, in 1954, Joseph R. McCarthy, who felt the sting so keenly that he drank himself to death three years later, aged forty-eight. Censure of a President has been occasionally proposed—in 1999, forty-four Democratic senators supported censuring Bill Clinton, as an alternative to impeaching him—but has been done only once, in 1834, when President Andrew Jackson incurred the displeasure of Henry Clay's Whigs in their struggle over the national bank.



The immediate consequence of Feingold's gambit was not Republican dismay but, yes, Democratic disarray—or, at least, every appearance of it. In the Washington *Post*, Dana Milbank described a stampede through the marble halls as Democratic senators fled from taking a position. "I haven't read it" (Obama). "I really can't right now" (John Kerry). "I'm not going to comment" (Charles Schumer). "Ask her after lunch" (Hillary Clinton's spokesman). Meanwhile, the left-populist blogosphere—a reliable barometer of the Democratic equivalent of the famous Republican "base"—erupted with praise for Feingold and contempt for his cautious Party colleagues. The adjectives used to limn the latter were pungent: "Spineless." "Sluggish." "Weak."

There is very little doubt that Bush deserves censure, not only for the warrant-

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL

less wiretapping but also for the many other catastrophes his Administration has generated, including the manipulation of intelligence to justify the Iraq war, the willful failure to heed warnings of what the invasion's aftermath would entail, the sanctioning of torture, and the neglect of "homeland security"—to say nothing of a set of domestic policies that sacrifice solvency, safety, the environment, and elementary fairness on the altar of enriching the rich in the name of Christian compassion. And there is scarcely less doubt that, ever since 9/11, Democratic opposition to Bush's war-related policies has been inordinately muted. (Even a figure as nonpopulist as Zbigniew Brzezinski protested last week that "Democratic leaders have been silent or evasive.") But none of that means that those who prefer strategies different from Feingold's are, ipso facto, spineless, sluggish, and weak.

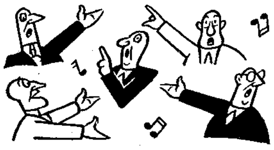
Feingold sprang his resolution on his Democratic colleagues without a word of advance warning or consultation. His Republican colleagues welcomed it, or professed to welcome it, as a distraction from Bush's manifold, ever-mounting troubles. Feingold focussed on the wiretapping because that is the one area where the Administration has admitted—indeed, boasted of—overriding a particular law. But it is also practically the only area of security policy where Bush retains some lingering public support. Feingold has "energized the base," but to what end? Apart from establishing a beachhead for his own fledgling Presidential campaign, he has succeeded mainly in deflecting the anger of a good many Democrats from Bush to—well, to "the Democrats."

Everyone complains that the Democrats have no clear, unified position on Iraq, and they don't. But what this analysis ignores is the fact that they can't. Without either a federal power center or an imminent Presidential election—without a President, a Speaker of the House, a Senate Majority Leader, or a Presidential nominee—no institutional instrument or leader has the clout to impose a consensus. Democrats advocate a spectrum of more or less similar positions—an array, not a disarray—ranging from Representative John Murtha's call for rapid disengagement to the detailed "strategic redeployment" plan backed by the Center for American Progress. But the Bush Administration has created a dilemma to which a satisfactory solution, no matter what new policies are adopted, has become vanishingly remote. As for the Democrats, their point is more implicit than explicit. It is that if they had had power they would not have made the same strategic, prudential, and moral errors that Bush and the Republicans have made, and that if they are entrusted with power they will not be wedded to a manifestly failing policy. Their job is to win power without either being completely cynical or talking themselves into a box that would make it impossible for them to exercise it wisely once they got it.

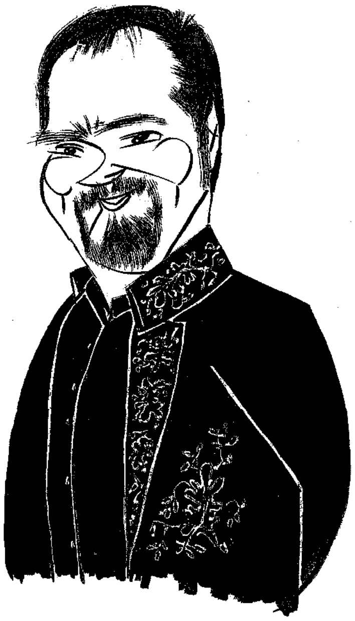
A poll taken last week by the American Research Group showed that a plurality of voters—forty-eight per cent—actually favor Feingold's resolution, with forty-three per cent opposed. Among Democratic respondents, support was seventy per cent. For senators whose seats are safely Democratic, supporting the resolution is a personally cost-free choice. (The same is true of the thirty-one members of the House who have endorsed an impeachment resolution: in 2004, all won with at least fifty-seven per cent of the vote. The average was seventy-five per cent.) That A.R.G. poll also showed independent voters narrowly opposing censure. The midterm election will be decided in places where no Democratic candidate can prevail without overwhelming independent support. Tactical calculations like these are never pleasant. But they are not always sordid, and sometimes they are necessary.

—*Hendrik Hertzberg*

FLESH AND BLOOD DEPT.
JOHNNY'S BOYS



Two Sundays ago, John Carter Cash woke up at four-thirty in the morning, drank some coffee, and kissed his wife goodbye. He got in his Ford F-150 and drove a few miles to pick up John Jackson Routh. John Carter is, technically, John Jackson's half uncle, but the two men call each other cousins. "Actually, he's more like a big brother to me," John Jackson said. The pair like to fish together, and go to movies, but that day (after having consolidated their suits in one hanging bag) they were on their way to the Nashville airport. They were flying to New York City, for the première of "Ring of Fire," a Broadway show built around the music of Johnny Cash, who was John Carter's father, John Jackson's step-grandfather, and the namesake of them both.



John Carter Cash

Thirteen hours later, John Carter and John Jackson were at the W Hotel in Times Square, attending a champagne reception to welcome them to New York. (Never mind that both men are teetotallers.) The sight of a bunch of blood relations walking around with drinks in their hands, along with the prevalence of all-black Cash-tribute outfits, made the event feel like a cheerful wake. "This is Jack Shaw—he's our family's spiritual adviser," John Carter said, introducing a man with a pompadour. Shaw had come from Johnstown, Pennsylvania, to be with the clan. "I used to tour with Johnny," he said. "I'd do a Bible study, and then, after the show, I'd stand to the side of the stage. Johnny would say, 'There's a minister here, if you need to talk.' " Jane Seymour, who was close to Johnny Cash, was there, clutching a rhinestone-encrusted minaudière in the shape of an acoustic guitar. Forty-five minutes before curtain, Bill Meade, a producer of the show, hushed the crowd. "We're looking for the gods of Broadway tonight," he said. "Cheers!"

"To John and June!" somebody hollered.

"And to Reba!" (Reba Cash Hancock, Johnny Cash's sister, died on March 5th.)

"And Rosey!" (Rozanna Adams, June Carter Cash's daughter, died in 2003.)

John Carter, John Jackson, and Jack Shaw waited in front of the hotel, so that they could walk Carlene Carter, who is John Carter's half sister and John Jackson's mother, across the street to the show. "Mama and John loved the theatre," Carlene said. "They liked 'Chorus Line' and 'Chicago.' Before John Carter was born, Mama used to bring us to New York and let us see a show every three months."

John Carter said that in the early eighties his parents would spend a quarter of their time in the city, and, as the youngest child, he often got to come along. "They had an apartment at 40 Central Park South. They'd come here at the end of tours, just to rest. We'd go to plays and we'd eat a lot. Probably the No. 1 thing was the Carnegie Deli: they'd always order lox, cheese blintzes, and matzo-ball soup."

John Carter is a big man, with an auburn goatee and a rollicking laugh. His mellow manner is offset by the Cash eyes, penetrating and solemn. He was wearing black embroidered trousers and a matching tailcoat. "This is my father's jacket," he said, "made by Manuel." He pulled it open to reveal a tag that read, in silver cursive stitching, "Johnny Cash." In front of the theatre, Kelly Hancock, a cousin, watched John Carter perform his duties as keeper of the family flame.

"John loved that boy," she said. "Had faith in him. Knew he could carry it off."

Jack Shaw nodded. "Amen."

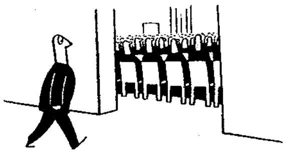
Eventually, everyone went inside for the performance. "Did we do you proud, John Carter?" one of the producers asked afterward. John Carter said that his parents would have been "bubbling over." He took a phone call from his half sister Rosanne Cash. "I tell you what—I really think they would've been crazy about it," he told her.

At the party afterward, at the Marriott Marquis, John Carter reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a photograph. "My son was just born, on the twenty-seventh of February," he said. He explained that his father had had a brother, Jack, who was killed in a table-saw accident at the age of fourteen. The new baby, Jack Ezra, will carry on his grandfather's brother's name.

—*Lauren Collins*

LIFE IN UNIFORM DEPT.

MOVIE DATE



The cadets in Major Jason Dempsey's Social Sciences 490A, Advanced Study in Defense Policy and Civil-Military Relations, at West Point, began the semester by reading Robert Heinlein's "Starship Troopers," a seminal piece of right-wing militaristic science fiction. In February, they studied Eisenhower's 1961 farewell address—the speech that warned against a coming "military-industrial complex." Then they read the popular antiwar novel "Johnny Got His Gun," and, one morning recently, they watched Eugene Jarecki's new documentary, "Why We Fight," which opens with the Eisenhower speech, and is highly critical of the decision to invade Iraq.

"One cadet, she asked me if I'm trying to make them all conscientious objectors," Dempsey joked on the day of the screening. For the occasion, he had invited Jarecki to appear before the class.

Jarecki leaped at Dempsey's offer. "It probably doesn't strike most people how much deep thinking goes on among the military," he said, sitting in the back seat of a Town Car, on the drive up from Manhattan. "Blaming the military for Iraq is blaming the messenger and the victim." Jarecki was wearing rumpled khakis and a blue blazer, with an "Ike" pin affixed to his lapel. "I go in here with a tremendous amount of good feeling," he said. "Though I might come out of here on a stretcher today, you never know."

First, there was the matter of gaining admittance. Between two checkpoints, at the campus border, Jarecki's driver managed to position himself in the lane reserved for trucks: a harmless mistake, or so it seemed, until he lowered his window and asked for directions to Lincoln Hall (otherwise known as the Combating Terrorism Center).

"First of all, you're in the wrong lane," a large uniformed guard shouted, before demanding ID, ordering the driver out of the car, and searching the trunk.

"You see that?" Jarecki said. "Eisenhower wouldn't have liked that. That's a centurion on edge. You don't have to be Noam Chomsky not to like that. That's like what you have at Dairy Queen when someone's rude to you at the counter, and you realize the manager's rude to the staff. It filters down from the top, from Washington. That's what makes a trigger-happy soldier."

Inside Lincoln Hall, the atmosphere was considerably more cordial. Dempsey handed Jarecki a syllabus, and they began talking about Eisenhower. Jarecki then spotted the so-called iPod Ghraib poster on a wall above Dempsey's desk—an image of the famous hooded torture victim listening to headphones—and asked, "Why do you have that?"

"To make cadets think," Dempsey said. "It's a conversation piece."

In the classroom, about forty cadets—mostly "firsties," or seniors—took their seats. The opening credits rolled, and one cadet whispered something about "The Fog of War" to a friend. "McNamara was an awesome dude," the friend replied.

Reactions to the film were mixed, from a couple of dozing heads, to an exclamation of "Nice!" at the sight of the first exploding bomb, and macho banter ("I hate the Air Force"). At one point, Vice-President Cheney was shown telling Tim Russert, "I really do believe that we will be greeted as liberators."

"You did your homework on that one, Dick," a cadet said.

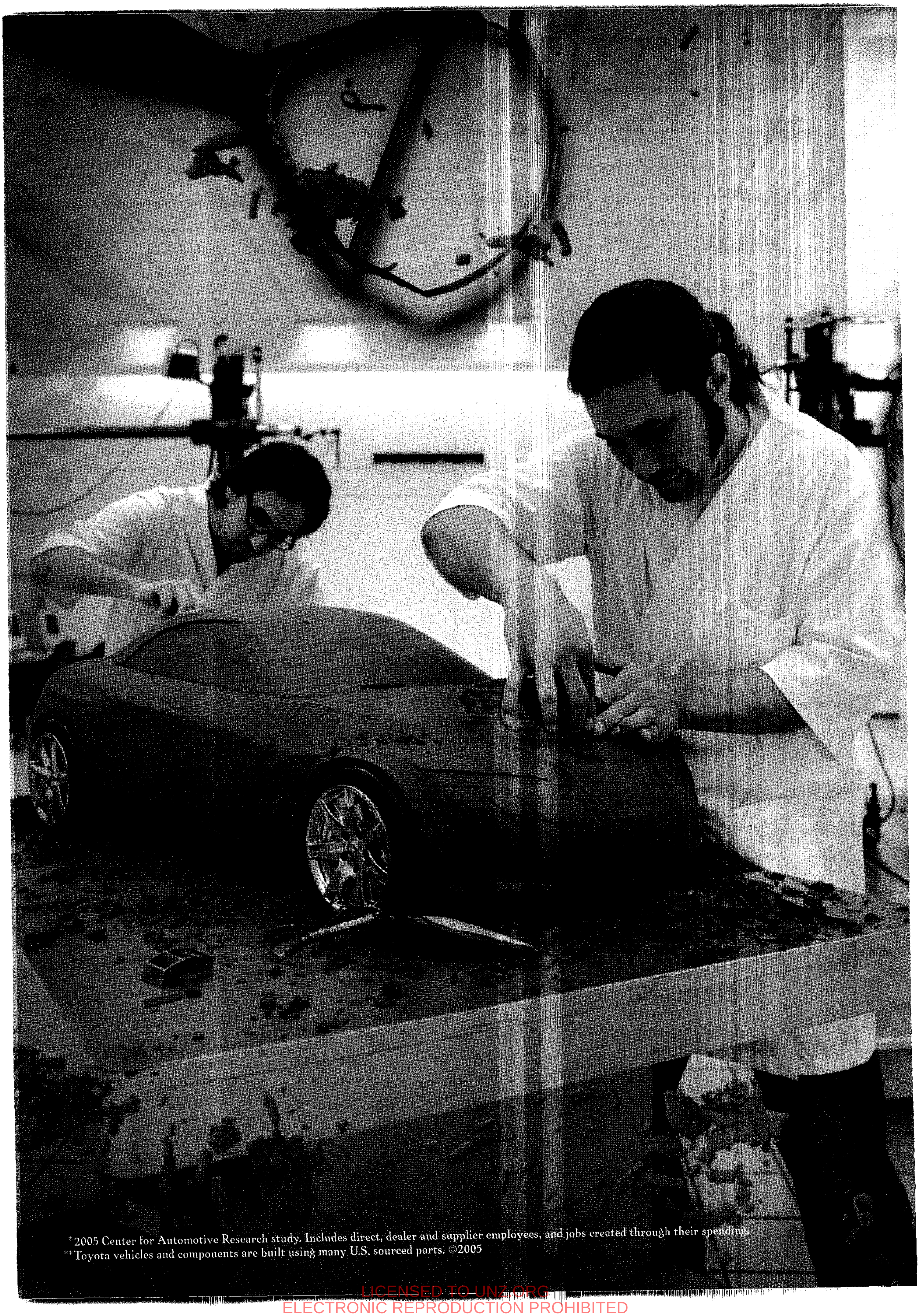
Questions, when it was over, were polite. "Sir, I mean to ask you: What do you hope to accomplish in this film? What is your desired end state?"

"I'd like to restore the prospect of a reflective and reasoned dialogue," Jarecki said.

The inevitable comparison to "Fahrenheit 9/11" was broached, and Jarecki, diplomatically, complimented Michael Moore's box-office success, while lamenting the public's appetite for oversimplified issues. "I'm like ginger ale," he said. "I'm not for everybody."

"I like ginger ale," the questioner said.

In private, various cadets discussed the film with the director. (Jarecki: "Did you like it?" Cadet: "Sir, I'm basically indifferent.") A female firstie, who figured she'd



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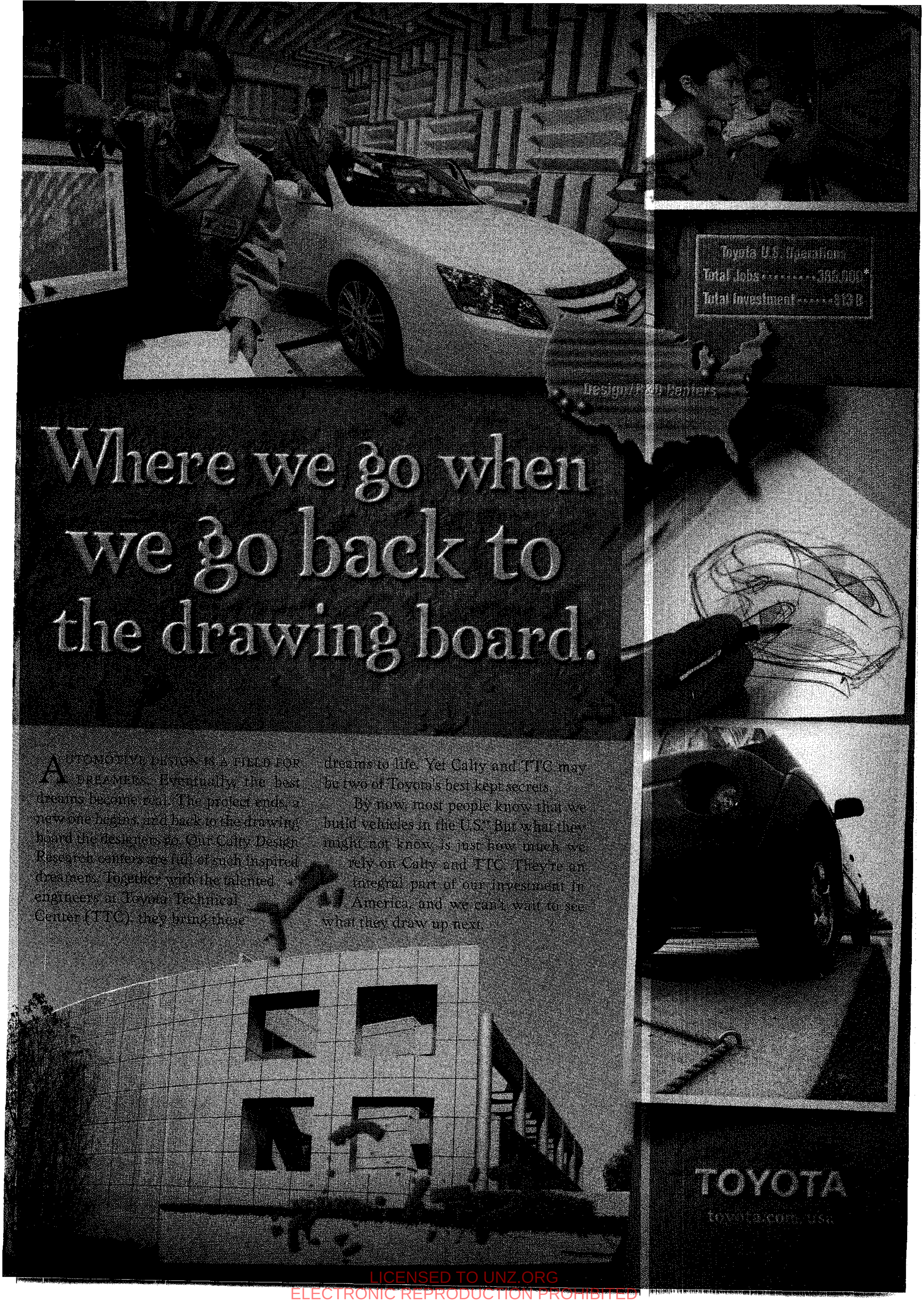

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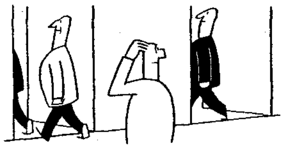
soon be headed for Iraq, lingered, discussing the cinematic tastes of her classmates. "They mostly like older war movies, like 'Platoon,'" she said.

Colonel Michael Meese, an economics professor who is the head of the Social Sciences Department and the son of former Attorney General Edwin Meese, told Jarecki afterward that he'd polled his cadets after Colin Powell's speech to the U.N., and immediately prior to the invasion, in March of 2003. "Each section voted nine to eight in favor," he said. "My next question: 'If ordered to go, *would* you go?' It was seventeen to zero. That's exactly what we want. Critical thinking is not insubordination." Meese's dissertation, "Examining Downsizing in the United States Army," rested on a nearby table, bound in leather.

—Ben McGrath

DEPT. OF AMENITIES
A NEW MAP



Wansoo Im, an adjunct professor of urban planning at Rutgers University, came to town the other day with a bold agenda. His plan was to cure one of Manhattan's oldest civic ills—the difficulty of finding a public rest room—by applying one of the coolest new tools on the Internet: Google Maps. (Other recent applications include pinpointing the whereabouts of both celebrities and baby-changing tables.) Arriving by train at Penn Station, Im stood outside the large public toilet to the right of the Amtrak ticket windows, elaborating on his idea: a map of available toilets in Manhattan, compiled Wikipedia style, and employing the free aerial photographs and street grids supplied by Google Maps. "If everyone contributes information to the map, pretty soon there will be no more rest-room problem," Im declared confidently, in Korean-accented English.

Assisting Im was a twenty-two-year-old Rutgers senior, Ian Kraut, who last term took Im's Geographic Information Systems course. Inspired by his professor's vision of spatial mapping, Kraut had already lined up a post-graduation job mapping properties for a real-estate agent in his home town, Columbus, Ohio. The geographers were joined by Ian's father, Robert Kraut, a professor of philosophy at Ohio State University, who happened to be in the city for a conference at Columbia on music and the mind. "I just want to hang out with my son," Kraut said.

Im had already plotted the Penn Station toilets on his site, www.nyrestroom.com, but he went in anyway. "I really have to go!" he said, undaunted by the sleeping people who could be seen through the slits between stalls.

After some confusion over the subway map, the expedition set off for the Upper West Side. First stop was the Beacon Hotel, so that Robert Kraut could drop off his suitcase. Im made an inquiry and was told that there was a rest room upstairs. "Upstairs! Interesting!" He came down beaming.

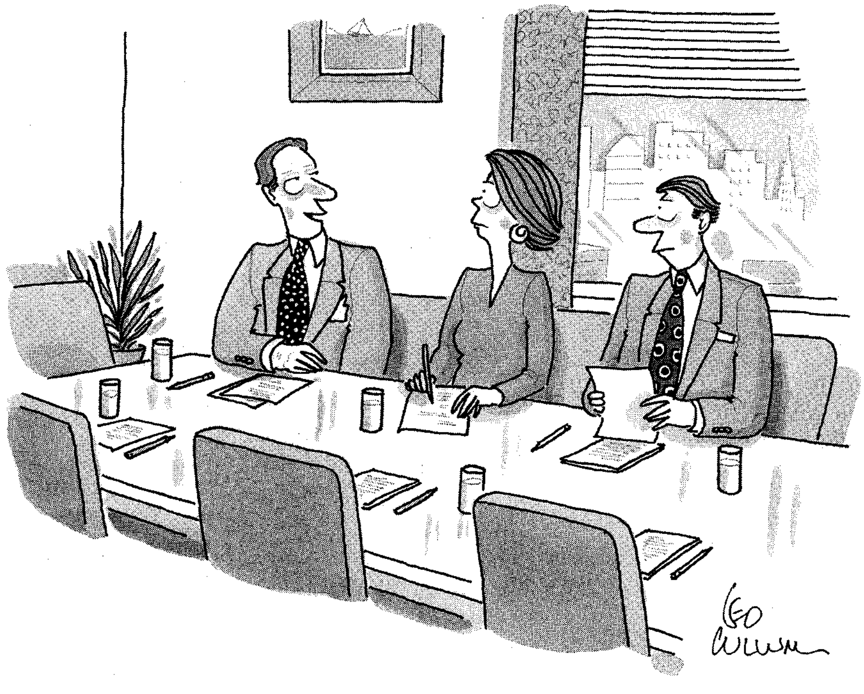
"Nice rest room. Small—only one seat. Warm, too!" He took a photograph and made a note of the address. Until recently, he explained, he would have needed his G.P.S. to plot the rest room's exact coördinates, but now Google Maps would do that for him.

Leaning into a cold wind, the party set off for Central Park West. As the three men entered the American Museum of Natural History, the philosopher looked up at the barrel-vaulted ceiling and exclaimed, "It's mind-blowing what man can do!" Kraut, who is also a jazz guitarist, has a habit of discussing philosophical matters in bebop slang. ("Walter Kaufmann was a very far-out cat," he said, of the celebrated interpreter of Nietzsche.) Prospects looked grim for a public rest room in the lobby, but Im asked the guard and was pointed toward a very pleasant one, just past the cloakroom.

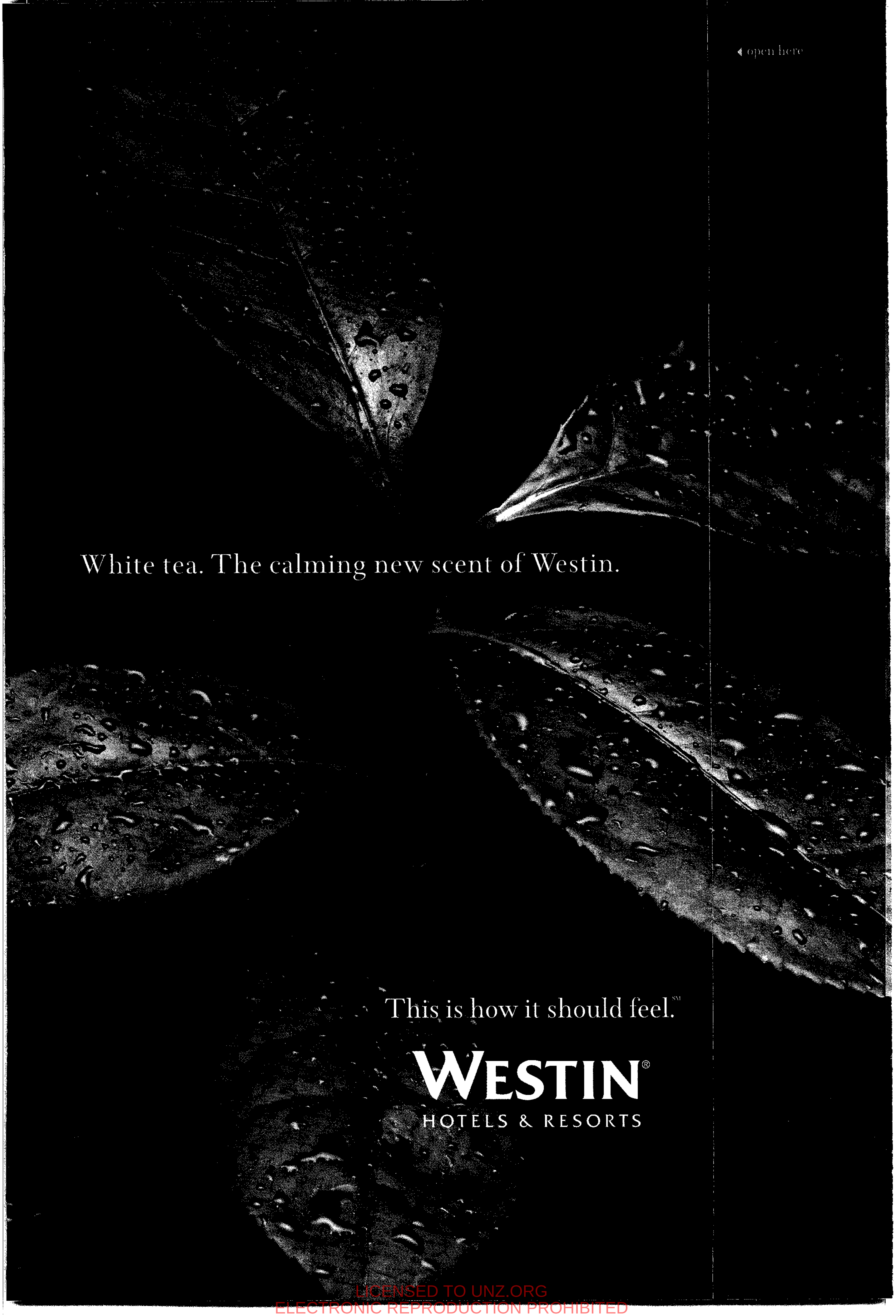
Most great cities have lots of public toilets. New York once did, back in the thirties, but by the seventies, owing to crime and budget crises, the majority of the toilets were closed. Last September, the city announced plans to install twenty new public toilets, although it's not clear when that will happen.

As a tourist, Im came equipped with a rest-room-friendly attitude. Whereas a New Yorker would just sneak in to some restaurant's bathroom, Im always asked permission first. His instincts are in synch with Manhattan's ongoing transformation into a giant mall. In fact, since 1990, thanks to all the new Starbucks, McDonald's, and big chain stores, there has been a huge increase in the number of public rest rooms.

On the downtown C train, heading for the Time Warner Center, Robert Kraut raised what seemed like an important point. "I can dig why you want to map the toilets," he said to Im. "But how do you get the information when you really need it, as it were?" Im con-



"Remember, in this negotiation you're the 'Paula Abdul.'"



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ceded that he hadn't quite worked out that part of his plan.

Inside the Time Warner Center, Im followed signs to the second-floor rest room. "Nice!" he said, indicating the motion-sensitive paper-towel dispenser.

On the way out of the mall, the group stopped at Borders to look for Vicki Rovere's book "Where to Go: A Guide to Manhattan's Toilets." Robert Kraut, on hearing of this work, said, "Someone beat you to it!"

Not really, Im explained, because his was a *community* mapping project. "What took an author maybe three years, we can do in three days," he said.

"Is that good?" Kraut asked skeptically.

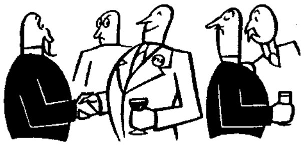
On the ground floor, they stopped at Fernando Botero's huge bronze sculpture of a male nude. Im could not resist standing with his head under the statue's well-defined buttocks.

"Rest room! Rest room!" he called out in a goofy voice.

"Oh, man!" the philosopher groaned.

—*John Seabrook*

DEPT. OF HOOPLA
LAUNCHING MR. WHITEHOUSE



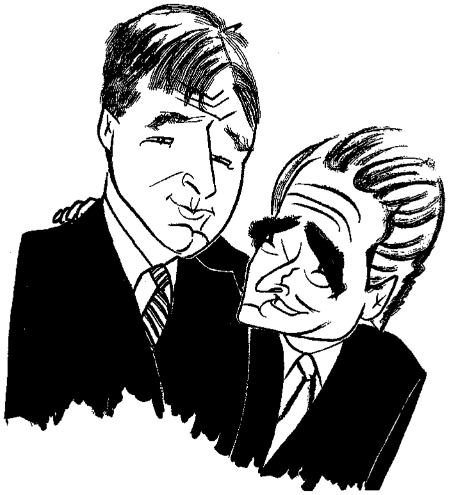
How do you get to Capitol Hill? Crab cakes! Other acceptable answers include "Connections," "Money," and "Votes." All those ingredients, except the last (November is a ways off), were in evidence last Thursday evening during a small fund-raiser for Sheldon Whitehouse, a Democratic senatorial candidate from Rhode Island, at a town house in the East Sixties.

Among the co-hosts, the headliner was Tom Daschle, the former Senate Majority Leader, but the house belonged to Martin Scorsese and his wife, Helen. The Scorseses never entertain (we're talking guests, not audiences); this was the first big party they'd had since they were married, eight years ago. Marty may be courteous and talkative, but he is not a nice-to-see-you, come-on-in kind of guy, and politics, to say nothing of the social requirements that come with participating in politics, has never been his thing; he'd rather be sitting in the dark, watching or cutting a film. Still, these are, to borrow his words, extraordinary times, and a man must do what he can, as well as what his wife would like him to. The idea of hosting a political fund-raiser had come to Helen while she and a friend, Kent Correll, presided over a play date between their daughters, who are six. "We were in the kitchen, moping about the Democrats, wondering why they can't just pull someone out of a hat," Helen said. Correll actually had a comer in mind—his old law-school friend Sheldon Whitehouse, who had served as attorney general of Rhode Island, and whose surname provides a handy hook for anyone called upon to introduce him. Whitehouse for Senate: it has a certain ring.

The Democrats, in their quest to gain Senate seats, regard Rhode Island as one of their best shots. The incumbent is Lincoln Chafee, a lapsed Republican, whose independence on such issues as the environment and Iraq has earned him the enmity of his party and a nettlesome primary challenge.

The first to arrive at the reception, one minute early, was Eliot Spitzer, another well-born attorney general aspiring to higher office. He joined Scorsese and Whitehouse in the center of the living room, and the men exchanged pleasantries about the Mafia. As the room filled, Whitehouse began to work his way through the crowd, Spitzer left to raise money for himself, and Scorsese retreated to a spot at the bottom of the stairs, where the furniture arrangement dissuaded people from getting too close.

Among the guests, who had paid at least a thousand dollars each, were many people who, if Scorsese ever chose to make a picture about Democratic fund-raising receptions in Manhattan, would certainly be candidates for cameos: Bob Kerrey, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, Leo Hindery, Jr., Patricia Duff (the Joe Pesci of the liberal money set). Another backer, Robert Kennedy, Jr., was not present. The Scorseses do not have what is known in Washington as a power wall, a gallery of me-with-important-people photographs. Instead, in their living room, the art work and the memorabilia pay tribute to ancestry and the movies. "It's a strange combination of our lives," Helen said. Representing Marty's life: five different posters for the Renoir film "La Grande Illusion," a sixteenth-century crucifix, the Stratocaster played by Robbie Robertson in "The Last Waltz," a display of Japanese dolls (a gift from Akira Kurosawa), and, in a bell jar, the pair of red ballet slippers worn by Moira Shearer in "The Red Shoes," which Scorsese bought at auction in London six years ago. Helen's world was represented by the book collection and some old family oil portraits, including one of her ancestor Gouverneur Morris, an author of the United States Constitution. There was a 16-mm. projector at one end of the room.



Sheldon Whitehouse and Martin Scorsese

After remarks from Helen Scorsese and Tom Daschle ("Wouldn't it be nice to have a Whitehouse in Washington we can count on?"), the candidate stood on the stairs to speak. Tall and affable, he invoked the Progressive era, and said of the current crop of Republicans, "The architecture of their brains does not allow them to consider even the concept of good government."

When Whitehouse was done, Scorsese reclaimed his spot at the bottom of the stairs. He began talking to a guest about Ethiopian film. A woman hovering nearby edged in. "Can I have a picture of you with my husband?" she said. "He's a neurologist, the best in the world."

The husband, who looked a bit like Mick Fleetwood, pushed through. "I adore you," he said. "I'm a neurologist."

"He'd marry you, if he could," his wife said.

Scorsese stood still for the camera.

—*Nick Paumgarten*

THE WAYWARD PRESS

FEAR FACTOR

Bill O'Reilly's baroque period.

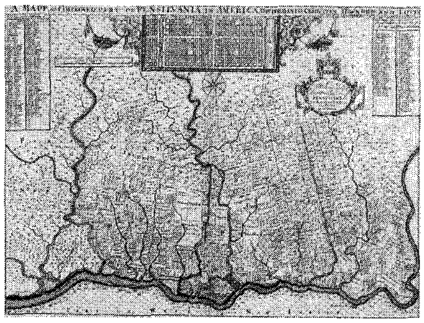
BY NICHOLAS LEMANN

During what you could call Bill O'Reilly's classical period, the first few years of "The O'Reilly Factor"—which débuted in 1996, at the same time as Fox News—O'Reilly seemed to be a recognizable member of the conservative-talk-show-host species, like his Fox stablemate Sean Hannity, or like Joe Scarborough, on MSNBC. He attacked Bill Clinton and Al Gore relentlessly; the Monica Lewinsky scandal was his signature subject. Now, ten years later, O'Reilly has become baroque, and "The O'Reilly Factor" is a complex affair, dense with self-references, obsessions, and elaborations, even though it still delivers a satisfying punch.

O'Reilly is the most popular host on cable news; his average nightly audience is about two million people, while Larry King, on CNN, has an audience about half that size. O'Reilly is most successful in attracting attention when he feuds with other media figures, which happens, in part, because they attack him and he is not one to turn the other cheek. He has started a petition campaign calling on MSNBC to replace Keith Olbermann, one of its prime-time hosts, with, oddly, the paleo-liberal Phil Donahue; he recently threatened a caller to his radio show—someone who mentioned Olbermann's name—with "a little visit" from "Fox security." Olbermann has repeatedly conferred on O'Reilly the top place in a "Worst Person in the World" competition, and, probably more to the point, when discussing O'Reilly he often finds ways to work in the word "falafel." That is a reference to a sexual-harassment suit that a former Fox News producer named Andrea Mackris filed against O'Reilly a couple of years ago. (The case was settled out of court, but not before it got extensive press attention.) Mackris produced what she said were quotes of O'Reilly on the phone discussing things that he imagined they might enjoy doing together. The most notorious of these was a scenario in which they would be in the shower and he would massage her with a loofah, a scrubby sponge—but then, as he went on talking, he slipped up and referred to it as "the falafel thing," which is funny not only because the picture of smearing wet mashed chickpeas on someone's body is profoundly unerotic but also because the mistake seems to be a peculiar by-product of O'Reilly's suspicion of things non-American. That's why, for O'Reilly, "falafel" is a fighting word.

O'Reilly often proclaims, with glee, the coming demise of Al Franken's "Air America," which he says may be dropped by its New York flagship station, WLIB. (Several years ago, Fox News filed—and then dropped—a lawsuit against Franken's publisher in connection with his book "Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them," much of which was devoted to O'Reilly.) He had a testy on-air exchange with David Letterman a couple of months ago, which has not risen to the status of an ongoing feud but may yet. He has said that if the *Times* continues to publish "personal attacks" on President Bush, especially in Frank Rich's column, "we'll just have to get into their lives," referring to Rich and the newspaper's editor, Bill Keller. He has called on his audience to shun several news organizations, including *The New Yorker*—whose specific sin was questioning the assertion, repeated frequently on "The O'Reilly Factor" during December, that the country is in the grip of a "war on Christmas."

A long time ago, the distilled essence of cable news seemed to be CNN's high-energy, low-production-value coverage of the first Gulf War. Today, the essence is O'Reilly, who is firmly planted in his studio, and who begins his show each night by leaning into a camera that is tightly focussed on his upper body, and almost projecting himself out of the television set with the force of his personality.



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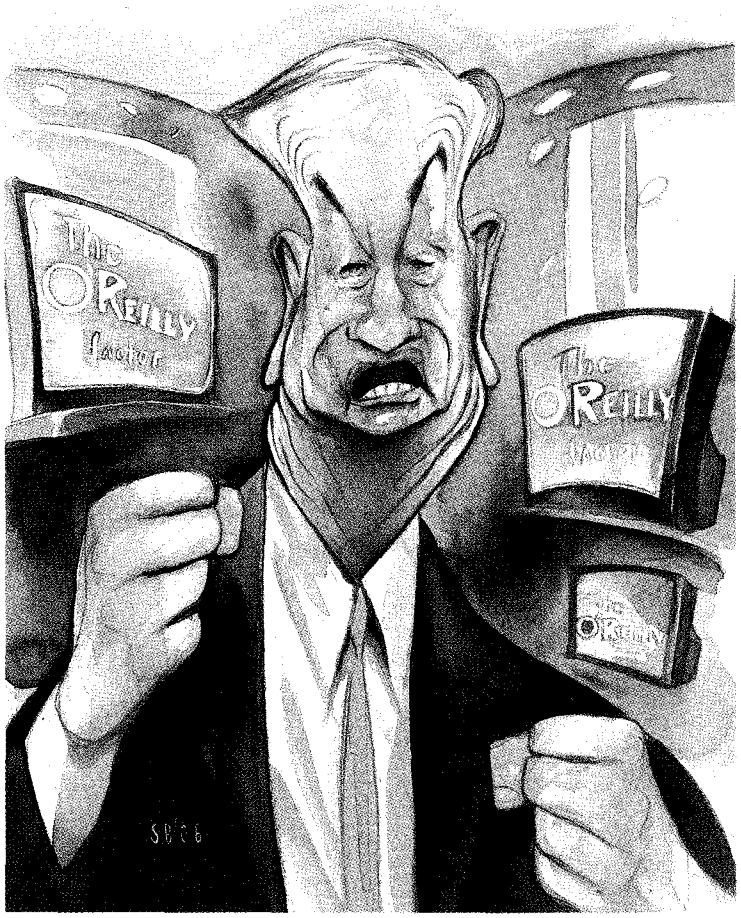
Another baroque aspect of this moment in O'Reilly's career is that "The Colbert Report," on Comedy Central, broadcasts what is essentially a full-dress parody of "The O'Reilly Factor." Stephen Colbert has obviously made a close study of O'Reilly's mannerisms and opinions, just as Colbert's producers have made a close study of the overblown red-white-and-blue swirled graphics that open "The O'Reilly Factor." (Colbert adds eagles and flags.) But Colbert is too young and too thin to mimic the physical presence of the six-foot-four O'Reilly, and he appears to realize this. So he delivers O'Reilly's brusque, jabbing hand gestures, and his primary-colored opinions, with a goofy half-smile, as if he were a kid playing dress-up in his dad's clothes. Like O'Reilly, Colbert has guests, but he often uses his fake right-wing persona to score points for the left, as he did last week when he pretended to grill Keith Olbermann for his attacks on O'Reilly.



O'Reilly is the beat cop for the American neighborhood.

STEVE BRODNER

O'Reilly has been playing O'Reilly so successfully for so long, and has developed such a substantial library of hooks, tics, and subplots, that he sometimes seems to be parodying himself, or parodying Colbert's parody of him; "The O'Reilly Factor" and "The Colbert Report" are a matched pair. Both shows air twice most weeknights—the rebroadcast of the previous night's "Colbert Report" is on during the broadcast of "The O'Reilly Factor," and the broadcast of "The Colbert Report" is on during the rebroadcast of "The O'Reilly Factor." With those hours, plus the regular anti-O'Reilly sallies of Olbermann and other hosts, and the relentless promotion of O'Reilly on other Fox shows, O'Reilly dominates cable news as much as Walter Cronkite dominated network news during his heyday, if not more so.

Every journalistic medium produces a characteristic set of forms and attitudes; network news is—even now—about authority, and cable news, increasingly, is about itself. Back in the classical period, liberal media-watchers did a brisk trade in pointing out that Fox News was not actually "Fair & Balanced," as its slogan claimed. That was not an earth-shattering revelation; "Fair & Balanced" had always been a code whose meaning—here's news that gives you the world as you already see it—was perfectly understood by the Fox audience. But Fox's conservatism has acquired a lot of curlicues. Conservatives control the White House, the House, the Senate, and, perhaps, the Supreme Court. Internecine battles are much more important than they were ten years ago, and it is harder to be simply "conservative." O'Reilly insists (implausibly, but he does take the trouble) that he is ideologically unclassifiable. His attitude toward President Bush is less than completely worshipful. "Summing up, I believe George W. Bush is personally honest but is also a charter member of the power-establishment club that plays by its own rules," O'Reilly wrote in his 2003 book, "Who's Looking Out for You?" He has a few "liberal" positions—he's anti-death penalty, pro-gay civil union, pro-gun control, and not entirely anti-abortion—although, if you look carefully, where he is on each of these issues is not where you are going to find Nancy Pelosi or Howard Dean. He has almost nothing in common with libertarians, except that he thinks taxes are too high. He is not a big fan of the Iraq war, or of the kind of maximalist, world-saving foreign policy that the war was meant to exemplify. Mainly, O'Reilly, like every political talk-show host with a big following, is a populist, who, in his beyond-irony way, is a rich, middle-aged white guy aligned with the ruling party, and who has the guts to stand up to the élitists who run (but also hate) this country. To say that that doesn't make any sense is to deny oneself the pleasure that a close study of O'Reilly affords.

Class—that is, class resentment—is where, for O'Reilly, politics, and everything else, begins. His first best-seller, "The O'Reilly Factor," published in 2000, asserts, "Whatever I have done or will do in this life, I'm working-class Irish American Bill O'Reilly." (Another of O'Reilly's feuds is with the columnist Michael Kinsley, who several years ago suggested that O'Reilly is actually from a middle-class background; last year, on the radio, O'Reilly objected to a call by the Los Angeles *Times* editorial page, then edited by Kinsley, for legal representation of detainees at Guantánamo Bay. "They'll never get it," O'Reilly said, "until they grab Michael Kinsley out of his little house and they cut his head off. And maybe when the blade sinks in, he'll go, 'Perhaps O'Reilly was right.' ") In the book, O'Reilly goes on, "No one ever told me or my sister that we were pretty far down the social totem pole while we were growing up in 1960s America. We took for granted that it was normal to buy cars only when they were secondhand, that every family clipped coupons to save money, and that luncheon meats were the special of the day." And so on: "When our family went out to eat, a rare treat, we didn't waste money on appetizers, if only because we didn't go to the kind of restaurants that offered appetizers. Typically the pasta dish was spaghetti, and that was it. No linguine, fettuccine, rigatoni, etceterini, etceterini, to confuse the issue."

I never saw Nassau County, Long Island, where O'Reilly, who is fifty-six, grew up, in the nineteen-sixties, but I'm guessing that restaurants so unpretentious that they wouldn't serve a soup-of-the-day didn't actually exist. Still, the idea of such a restaurant captures O'Reilly's idea of himself. As soon as he left home—to go to Marist College, in Poughkeepsie, New York—O'Reilly had occasional encounters with members of the fortunate classes, in which, inevitably, he was put down. At Marist, he longed for the girls from nearby Vassar, but "the Ivy Leaguers up from Princeton or down from Cornell got the dates; we were treated like hired help." By O'Reilly's account, wealth and fame have not changed the pattern. Even now, when he wanders within range of the "swells," which he does surprisingly often for a guy who despises them, they sneer at him, just as they would sneer at any ordinary American.

Unlike some conservative talk-show hosts, O'Reilly hasn't had a career in politics or government; he has never been based in Washington. Long Island notwithstanding, he really comes from a place called television news. After college, he taught high school in Florida, then got a degree in broadcast journalism and worked his way around the country's media markets, starting as a consumer reporter in Scranton, Pennsylvania. In the early eighties, he landed at CBS News, as a correspondent for the "Evening News." It should have been his big break, but it didn't work out. Although he had a happier time at another network, ABC, before joining the syndicated show "Inside Edition," in 1989, and then Fox, the CBS episode has stayed with him. It hurt—it still hurts. No matter how big a star he becomes, he's eternally the guy who was banished from the charmed circle.

NOTHING FOR ME, THANKS.
P. Steiner

O'Reilly's account of what went wrong at CBS has him, as always, pissing off powerful people because he won't play their phony games. The key moment seems to have come when, during the Falkland Islands War, O'Reilly and his crew got some exclusive footage of a riot in the streets of Buenos Aires and it wound up being incorporated into a report from the veteran correspondent Bob Schieffer, which failed to mention O'Reilly's contribution. O'Reilly was furious, and after that, by his account, he was in career Siberia at CBS. During this period of forced inaction, he later wrote, "on a visit to Cape Cod, Massachusetts, I stumbled upon an amazing story. The tiny fishing village of Provincetown had become a gay mecca!" O'Reilly took a cameraman there and did a piece on the dangers this posed to local kids, but the network wouldn't air it. Not long after that, he left.

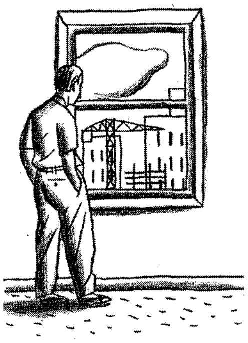
In 1998, after the launch of "The O'Reilly Factor," but before superstardom, he published a thriller called "Those Who Trespass," which is his most ambitious and deeply felt piece of writing. "Those Who Trespass" is a revenge fantasy, and it displays extraordinarily violent impulses. A tall, b.s.-intolerant television journalist named Shannon Michaels, the "product of two Celtic parents," is pushed out by Global News Network after an incident during the Falkland Islands War, and then by a local station, and he systematically murders the people who ruined his career. He starts with Ron Costello, the veteran correspondent who stole his Falkland story:

> The assailant's right hand, now holding the oval base of the spoon, rocketed upward, jamming the stainless stem through the roof of Ron Costello's mouth. The soft tissue gave way quickly and the steel penetrated the correspondent's brain stem. Ron Costello was clinically dead in four seconds.

Michaels stalks the woman who forced his resignation from the network and throws her off a balcony. He next murders a television research consultant who had advised the local station to dismiss him: he buries the guy in beach sand up to his neck and lets him slowly drown. Finally, during a break in the Radio and Television News Directors Association convention, he slits the throat of the station manager. O'Reilly describes each of these killings—the careful planning, the suffering of the victim, the act itself—in loving detail.

In the novel, O'Reilly splits his alter ego in two, by creating a second tall, b.s.-intolerant Irish-American, a New York City homicide detective named Tommy O'Malley. O'Malley is charged with solving the murders that Michaels has committed, while competing with Michaels for the heart of Ashley Van Buren, a blond, busty aristocrat turned b.s.-intolerant crime columnist. Michaels, a possibly once good man driven mad by broadcast journalism, tells Ashley, "Journalism, as you know, is a profession that requires its participants to be aggressive, skeptical, and persistent in pursuit of the truth. Yet, the moment you enter your own newsroom, you've got to drop all that. The managers want total conformity. They want you to play the game, to do what you're told to do." And, later, "It's a self-obsessed business. 'How are things going to impact on *me*? Is this person my friend or my enemy? I'll get him before he gets me.' That kind of thing. It's a brutal way to live." Again and again, O'Reilly's characters remind us that on-air broadcasters are among the most powerful and glamorous people in America, and so the stakes in television newsroom politics could not be higher.

Tommy O'Malley, too, has a lot of ambition and rage, but he channels it into bringing bad guys (not just Michaels but a collection of urban ethnic street punks out of the old "Dirty Harry" or "Death Wish" movies) to justice. Michaels, though rejected by the suits, the swells, and the phonies, is not entirely immune to their values. He lives in a mansion, eats filet mignon, dresses stylishly, and can't dismiss the A-listers from his consciousness. He is drawn to places like Malibu, Martha's Vineyard, and the Upper West Side, partly to carry out his murders and partly because a kind of psychological undertow pulls him there. O'Malley seems not to know that they exist; he is broke and not stylish. He is morally redeemed by the police mission, just as Michaels is morally damned by television.



O'Reilly begins each program with an editorial called "Talking Points Memo," which is often about the news of the day. When the subject is the Bush Administration, O'Reilly is supportive, if not in the respectful manner of most of Fox's personalities. He seems like a guy who was initially skeptical but had a few candid, head-clearing conversations with people in the Administration and eventually came around. In the case of the Dubai port deal, which most other talk-show hosts objected to strenuously, O'Reilly stated, on "Talking Points," that the deal's collapse was harmful to our diplomatic relationships in the Arab world.

Still, politics gets no more airtime from O'Reilly than media-bashing. If what you know about "The O'Reilly Factor" comes mainly from its opponents on the left—from movies like "Outfoxed" and Web sites like Media Matters—and you watch it regularly for a while, you'll be surprised by how little of the content these days is political. "The O'Reilly Factor" is, increasingly, not a conservative show but a cop show—"O'Reilly: Special Victims Unit," perhaps—devoted particularly to sex offenders; the host, in effect, is Shannon Michaels playing Tommy O'Malley. Once, when Howard Stern was asked to explain his success, he said that he owed it to lesbians. O'Reilly owes his to child molesters.

Faithful watchers of "The O'Reilly Factor" are familiar with a cast of characters whose names rarely appear in the mainstream press but whom the show treats as major figures, because they serve so well as emblems of what's wrong with America. They're either sex offenders, or people insufficiently tough on sex offenders, or people with lesser moral failings, or America-haters: people like Jay Bennish, a Colorado high-school teacher who was placed on leave after one of his students taped him blasting President Bush in class (he has since been reinstated); Shawn Strawser, a Florida twenty-year-old who induced four preteen girls to perform oral sex on him; Edward Cashman, a Vermont judge who sentenced the convicted molester of a six-year-old girl to a minimum of sixty days in prison (Cashman later increased the minimum sentence to three years); and Matt Dubay, a twenty-five-year-old Michigan man who is trying to avoid paying his former girlfriend child support because he didn't want the child that he fathered and she bore.

"Parents today are rightfully worried about their children being abducted or abused, even in their own neighborhoods," O'Reilly writes in "The No Spin Zone," his 2001 book. "But why is that? Are there more child molesters in the United States now than in my childhood years in the fifties and sixties? Are they bolder for some reason? Is it possible they are being encouraged?" O'Reilly struggles for half a paragraph to support what he and his viewers are sure of—that sexual molestation is alarmingly on the rise—and finds scant data, but plows ahead anyway: "There is also something else in play in this country that is much subtler: the gradual contagion of nonjudgmental acceptance. The result of this contagion is that behavior that would have been roundly condemned forty years ago is now 'understood' or in some cases even accepted."

"The O'Reilly Factor" 's best foils are not so much child molesters as people who, in O'Reilly's view, are standing in the way of molesters' being locked up for a long, long time. The North American

Man/Boy Love Association is almost too obvious a target, and, anyway, there aren't enough other overt defenders of child molesting to provide guests night after night. O'Reilly's steady diet is civil libertarians and defense lawyers; the emotional chord he strikes, even if he doesn't state his position, is that scum don't deserve liberties and shouldn't have lawyers. Here's O'Reilly interviewing Richard Rosenbaum, the lawyer for Lionel Tate, a Florida boy whose conviction for killing a six-year-old girl when he was twelve years old was overturned by a higher court:

O'Reilly: Well, wait a minute, now, he killed a six-year-old girl.

Rosenbaum: Yes, he did.

O'Reilly: And it's a human being. And you're telling me that I should feel sorry for this guy, Tate. And now, with all of the counselling and all of the attention, he runs around with a knife? Come on.

Rosenbaum: Well, he didn't have a knife. And first of all, it was a pocketknife. And in Florida, anything under four inches doesn't count as a weapon. Also . . .

O'Reilly: Well, it was a four-inch blade, was it not?

Rosenbaum: It was a four-inch blade. It was thrown on the ground, we think, by his cousin, who was with him. The whole thing was prompted by a verbal altercation that Lionel had with his mom. Lionel walked away from the house in the middle of the night. He was on his way back home. He was just out for a walk. He shouldn't have done it. But he's still a child. We must keep in mind, he's only seventeen. He's under a lot of pressure. He sits in the house all day long, every single day, and it's difficult on him. He only has three months left to do, and we still think that he can be a beneficial person to society.

O'Reilly: You know, I just can't take the chance. I just can't take the chance that he's a beneficial person to society.

Rosenbaum: What are you going to do, lock up every kid and just throw away the key?

O'Reilly: Yeah, I'm going to lock up everybody who kills a six-year-old girl.

O'Reilly belongs to the tradition of Joe Pyne, Morton Downey, Jr., and Bob Grant—pugilistic conservative talk-show hosts who required a liberal foil. In the upside-down calculus of "The O'Reilly Factor," where attacking is the brand and, therefore, your worst enemy is your best friend, there is no more essential organization than the American Civil Liberties Union. Also welcome, when O'Reilly's bookers can lure them into the studio, are those who, citing civil liberties, oppose strict efforts to crack down on sex offenders—efforts such as Jessica's Law, which would require someone who finishes a jail term for child molesting to wear a G.P.S. tracking device for life, and would prohibit him or her from living within two thousand feet of any school or park. Then, there are academics and intellectuals who, though they usually aren't willing to defend the rights of child molesters, may be prepared to argue that a culture of moral relativism is not sweeping the country. Sometimes somebody will come on the show who is even, by O'Reilly's lights, willing to attack America itself.

O'Reilly sparring with a guest is like a big jungle cat playing with its prey. He begins by cordially greeting the person, and then, all business, and with a pleasant official smile, he asks a question or two. Viewers know where O'Reilly stands, so they can tell what his reaction will be—and he helps us, with a disapproving squint or a set of his square jaw or a flash of astonishment. Very rarely, the drama will be one of happy surprise, if the guest turns out to be more reasonable than expected—let's say, a single mom who is willing to admit that growing up with two parents is better for a child—and O'Reilly will soften and allow himself a fond smile. More often, the guest will venture into an area that makes O'Reilly mad, and he'll have no choice but to pounce, and defend this country's values and its children. Part of the pleasure of "The O'Reilly Factor" is knowing that O'Reilly is a guy with a temper, and he might lose it. He reddens, sits up, and presses the guest, who may begin to stammer helplessly (in which case O'Reilly usually pulls back), or to backpedal and make excuses, in the manner of Richard Rosenbaum (in which case O'Reilly keeps boring in), or to insult O'Reilly (in which case O'Reilly may begin yelling—the big payoff). He's the beat cop for the American neighborhood, who may have been a little excessive at times, may occasionally have run afoul of Internal Affairs, but law-abiding folks trust him because they know he's on their side. His liberal guests are like suspects he's pulled over: in the end, he's probably just going to frisk them and let them go with a genial warning, but if they try anything, well, he carries a nightstick for a reason.

The connection between the scourge of child sex abuse and liberals whom O'Reilly doesn't like—a long list that includes George Clooney, Hillary Clinton, Paul Krugman, and Alec Baldwin—may not be obvious, but, to O'Reilly's way of thinking, both are part

SIXTIETH BIRTHDAY DINNER

If in the men's room of our favorite restaurant
while blissfully pissing *riserva spumante*
I punch the wall because I am so old,
I promise not to punch too carelessly.

Our friend Franco cooks all night and day
to transform blood and bones to osso buco.
He shouldn't have to clean them off his wall
or worry that a customer gone cuckoo

has mushed his knuckles like a slugger
whose steroid dosage needs a little tweaking.
My life with you has been beyond beyond
and there's nothing beyond it I'm seeking.

I just don't want to leave it, and I am
with every silken bite of tiramisu.
I wouldn't mind being dead
if I could still be with you.

—*Michael Ryan*

of a national climate of permissiveness and relativism. This is manifested in the unprovable, but no doubt painful, loss of the norms that O'Reilly and his audience remember growing up with. The implied connection, anyway, gives O'Reilly a good pretext for the odd but compelling mixture of subjects on "The O'Reilly Factor," with foreign policy one minute, a lurid (one might even say titillating) sex crime the next, and the *Times* columnist Nicholas D. Kristof's latest unfair attack on O'Reilly the next. (O'Reilly is feuding with Kristof, who has assembled from readers' pledges a notional fund to send O'Reilly on a reporting trip to Darfur. O'Reilly recently parried by saying that the *Times* "continues to ignore the child predator situation here in the U.S.A.") It would be useless to accuse O'Reilly of trafficking in cultural symbols and not substance, because to him cultural symbols *are* substance. Like every artist, he has created a territory that is distinctively his, and under anyone else's supervision would not cohere.

In earlier times, O'Reilly's bookers were more successful in attracting big-name liberals into the "No Spin Zone." It gave O'Reilly the opportunity to confront, say, Sean Combs with the feeling that he was speaking truth to power ("People are under the impression that rap music and this rap world is a violent gangster-ridden corrupt enterprise"), and to get a lot of mileage out of the failure of, say, Hillary Clinton to appear as a guest. Lately, the guests on the left who make "The O'Reilly Factor" fun have been lesser figures—such as Mel Feit, of the National Center for Men—for whom an on-air confrontation with O'Reilly is a journey to the big time. O'Reilly is not only bigger than these people; he's usually also smarter, handsomer, better spoken, better groomed, and more sophisticated. O'Reilly imagines himself to be the underdog in a confrontation with any liberal, but, when he goes after one, it can come across as the television equivalent of police brutality—bullying undertaken for the sheer joy of bullying. Probably the most notorious example, featured prominently in "Outfoxed," was his 2003 interview with Jeremy Glick, the left-wing son of a September 11th victim, who had signed a newspaper advertisement opposing the invasion of Afghanistan:

GLICK: Let me finish. You evoke 9/11 to rationalize everything from domestic plunder to imperialistic aggression worldwide.

O'REILLY: O.K. That's a bunch . . .

GLICK: You evoke sympathy with the 9/11 families.

O'REILLY: That's a bunch of crap. I've done more for the 9/11 families by their own admission—I've done more for them than you will ever hope to do.

GLICK: O.K.

O'REILLY: So you keep your mouth shut when you sit here exploiting those people.

GLICK: Well, you're not representing me. You're not representing me.

O'REILLY: And I'd never represent you. You know why?

GLICK: Why?

O'REILLY: Because you have a warped view of this world and a warped view of this country.

No television host's career lasts forever, and it may be that O'Reilly is too hot, too close to entertainment, to maintain his position as long as a network anchorman might. O'Reilly has been able to reach the top of the cable-news ratings and stay there—and to turn the deep and determined enmity of the left to his advantage—by relentlessly reminding his audience of how much the left hates him. This baroque period of O'Reilly's is partly circumstantial: it's hard to be straight-ahead if you're essentially oppositional and the people you like are in power, if the guests you most want will not appear on your show, and if it's nearly impossible to demonstrate the existence of the trends you have made it your mission to oppose. O'Reilly is an amazingly nimble talent, and part of his skill is how persuasively he communicates that he is completely uncensored and incapable of guile or calculation.

When O'Reilly's day has passed, though, he certainly will have left a lasting stamp on cable news, which is increasingly a medium of outsize, super-opinionated franchise personalities. It is hard to remember, without taking a minute to think about it, who delivers the morning and evening news on the cable networks, or who the main reporters are. Cable is not a medium for providing information, and it is not going to become one anytime soon. Cable is the world that Bill O'Reilly made. National politics will change long before that does. ♦

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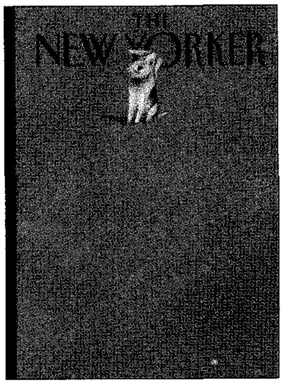

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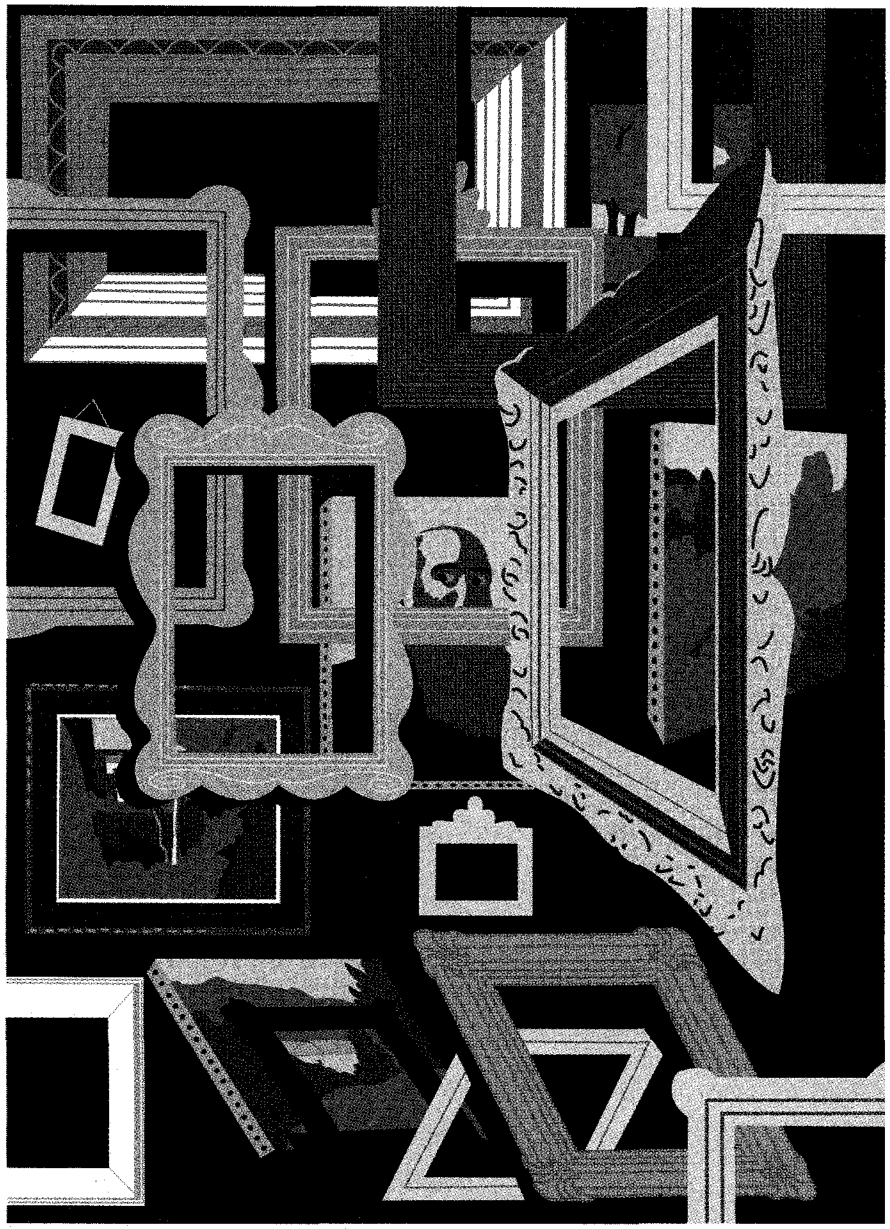
ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

FRAME GAME

Finding the right fit for an Impressionist painting.

BY LEO CAREY

The Brooklyn Museum's conservation department has big windows that face south, toward the Botanic Garden, suffusing the rooms with natural light. One morning not long ago, classical music played quietly on an old radio, and, lying around on trolleys, like patients on gurneys, an assortment of objects awaited treatment—dismembered statues, decomposing mosaics, snapped Native American pipes. One conservator patiently shored up a hole below the sleeve of a Dutch woman in a seventeenth-century portrait by Thomas de Keyser; another applied glue to a water-damaged patch in a Spanish genre painting. Nearby, a canvas, twenty-one inches by twenty-six, by the French Impressionist Camille Pissarro, stood frameless on an easel, looking not very different from how it must have appeared when Pissarro finished it. Standing in front of it were Elizabeth Easton, the museum's curator of European paintings and sculpture, and Tracy Gill and Simeon Lagodich, a married couple who own a frame gallery and restoration studio in Tribeca, and who were about to make a new frame for the picture.



Camille Pissarro wrote that gilt frames "stank of the bourgeois."

Lagodich, an alert man with large spectacles and a droopy mustache, peered closely at the canvas. "Very different in person, I must say," he said. So far, he had been working from a full-scale photograph. Painted in 1875, "The Climbing Path, L'Hermitage, Pontoise" is a view of tiled roofs through trees; the right side of the canvas is dominated by a snaking hillside path, which Pissarro has rendered with a coarse swath of tan pigment. Easton pointed out the daring way in which the flatly painted road seemed to defy perspective. "Look at it," she said. "He's gone at it with a palette knife. It's got an amazing paint application." Easton, whom everyone calls Buffy, is a loquacious, brown-haired woman in her forties; she is a meticulous dresser, with a taste for chinoise jackets. She explained that the painting came from a period in the eighteen-seventies when Pissarro and Paul Cézanne lived and worked side by side, often painting the same scenes. It was shortly going out on loan for a big exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, "Pioneering Modern Painting: Cézanne & Pissarro," which sought to demonstrate the affinities of Pissarro's style with Cézanne's in this period; the show would then travel internationally. The picture had been in an undistinguished gilt frame, and the exhibition had inspired Easton to commission a frame that would draw attention to the painting's revolutionary qualities.

Until recently, the role of frames in the art-historical world was, in every sense, marginal. But in the past three decades curators have begun to look at the frames in their collections more critically. They often find an incoherent assemblage of styles, reflecting the tastes of generations of collectors, dealers, and curators, who have tended to favor the curvy gilt frames of eighteenth-century France, even though many artists, from the mid-nineteenth century on, actively

RICHARD McGUIRE

disliked this aesthetic. Now that the study of frames has emerged as a field in its own right, museums across Europe and America have set about replacing examples that are historically inappropriate or poorly made. Paul Mitchell, a London frame dealer, whose book "A History of European Picture Frames," co-authored with Lynn Roberts, is considered a standard work, told me, "If you think how many crappy frames there are on most gallery walls, if you took the pictures out and put the frames up, you'd just ask someone to come and take them away and burn them." Easton, an expert on the painter Édouard Vuillard, became interested in frames about a decade ago, and, since then, has commissioned new frames for works by Monet, Caillebotte, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Morisot. For the Pissarro commission, she wanted Gill and Lagodich to imitate an unconventional nineteenth-century frame that she had recently seen on a Morisot painting. It had a border of gilded laurel leaves and berries, which surrounded a strip of stained wood with a very shallow downward step; next to where the painting would be—the "sight edge," as framers call it—was a narrow strip of white. The frame was strikingly similar to one that Pissarro had once designed.

Lagodich, his fingers stained brown from shellac, produced several rough corner samples of stained wood from a bag. Like home buyers experimenting with swatches, the three took turns holding the samples up to the canvas, viewing the effects of the various shades of wood stain on the painting. When Lagodich brought out the darkest sample, its deep, warm red elicited a gasp of approval from Easton, who thought that it would complement the red tones of the roofs on the left side of the painting. But, next to the picture, the color seemed too vibrant, threatening to overwhelm the more subtle tones of the pigment. Then Lagodich held up the lightest of the samples against the painting. "It looks too new," Easton said.

Lagodich is used to the difficulty of trying to make new things look old. "What you're trying to do is re-create the ravages of time," he told me later. Older objects acquire a particular lustre, a patina, that is hard to fake. Often, when Gill and Lagodich see buildings in Tribeca being renovated, they try to grab old joists that could be reused in a frame. They haunt estate sales and auctions. A few years ago, they bought a cache of old white moldings that had come from a Baltimore framing company which closed in the early nineteen-hundreds. Easton had seen in them the kind of aged white that she wanted for the sight edge of the new frame. "It's the shine of years," Easton said, as Gill produced samples and laid them on the table, the morning light falling across them. "What I loved was the patina, the milkiness."

"We bought probably ten thousand feet of it," Gill said of the moldings. "More than twenty different profiles. Don't know if they were meant to be gilded originally, but we just kept them white."

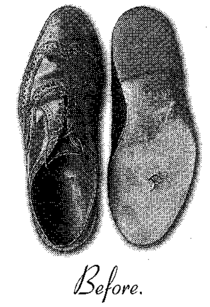
"Is this just gesso?" Easton asked.

"It's extruded gesso, which nobody makes anymore," Gill said, explaining that the gesso, a kind of paste made from chalk and animal glue, had been applied to a wooden core, creating a more pristine finish.

Returning to the structure of the frame, the group addressed the question of how the gilded laurel-and-berry border should be placed on it. Easton had given Gill and Lagodich a photograph of the Morisot frame, but small details were hard to see. Was there a narrow strip of wood between the border and the stained-wood panel? Or was it just a shadow? Lagodich's experience of frames led him to believe the former, but Easton, who had examined the Morisot frame closely, was convinced that it was the latter.

Lagodich quietly dissented. "There's something weird that happens when ornament lies right down on something," he said. "Trust me. It's going to look like a stick-on. It's not going to look right." The morning's only disagreement hung in the air. Eventually, Lagodich said, "I'll do it both ways, and you can see for yourself."

The first frames in Western painting were part of the picture, carved out of the same piece of wood as the main panel. Medieval altarpieces were made by teams that included a carver, a gilder, and a painter. According to Mitchell and Roberts's history, it was not unusual for the carver to be paid the most, and for the painter to receive the panel only after it had been carved and gilded. Until the end of the fourteenth century, the influence of Byzantine art meant that the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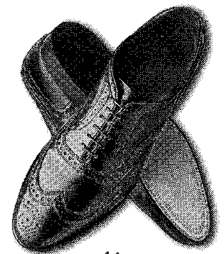
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entire surface of the picture was gilded. But, as the naturalistic backgrounds and perspectival approach of the Renaissance took hold, gold retreated to the margins, where, during centuries of candlelight, it reflected beams into the heart of the painting itself.

Throughout the Renaissance, the finest frames and most influential styles generally came from Italy. In the seventeenth century, however, French craftsmen began to take frame-making to new levels of specialization and finesse. During the Baroque and Rococo periods, they embellished the frame's basic rectangle with an undulating rhythm of twisting ornament, often adding elaborate cartouches—shaped like shells, leaves, fleurs-de-lis—at the corners and in the center of each side. These pieces, intricately carved, most often in oak or linden, are regarded by many collectors as the apogee of the framer's craft. After the French Revolution, however, the labor required to create such ornate marvels was no longer affordable, and, simultaneously, the emerging middle class demanded cheap art in cheap frames mass-produced from wooden molds. (Some carvers, short of work, ended up carving the molds that would make them redundant.) It was also common to recycle gilt frames and affix them to new pictures. Many nineteenth-century landscapes were placed in old portrait frames that had simply been rotated ninety degrees.

To some observers, however, the gilt frame looked gaudy. Immanuel Kant, in his "Critique of Judgment" (1790), wrote that if an ornament "does not itself enter into the composition of the beautiful form—if it is introduced like a gold frame merely to win approval for the picture by means of its charm—it is then called finery and takes away from the genuine beauty." The first sustained attack on the dominant style came some eighty years later, in the early exhibitions of the Impressionists. Pissarro, one of the more politically subversive of the group, wrote that exhibitions where gilt frames were obligatory "stank of the bourgeois." He and other Impressionists began to experiment with different ways of framing their work.

One notable innovator was Degas. A restless polymath, he covered pages of notebooks with unconventional designs for frames, drawn in cross-section. One afternoon, Buffy Easton met me at the Metropolitan Museum—"the greatest encyclopedia in the world for this stuff"—to look at the frames on the Degas pictures from the Havemeyer collection. She stopped at a small Degas painting from 1866, "The Collector of Prints," and explained that its subtle frame is one of the most famous he ever designed. It had an area of flat wood next to the picture and a pattern of grooved parallel lines at the edge, which are known to frame scholars as *chemins de fer*—railroad tracks. Speaking in an excited museum whisper, Easton praised the frame's restraint: "It gives you a visual break between the picture and the room."

Degas's opinions on frames were not always shared by his collectors, Easton said. Once, a friend of Degas's bought a painting from him and replaced its gray-green frame with a gilt one. When Degas saw the result the next time he visited, he pried the canvas out with a two-sous coin and stalked off with it. But he was fighting a losing battle, because collectors love to reframe their acquisitions. "The only thing a collector can do to establish any sort of impact on a picture is to reframe it," Easton said, noting that, for many of the early collectors of Impressionist art, ornate gilt frames would have had the benefit of matching their sumptuous furniture. Unfortunately, such treatment has often obscured the visual radicalism of Impressionist works. As Easton put it, "It doesn't make them more exciting. It makes them look like they were in living rooms on Park Avenue."

Some Impressionists, searching for an alternative to gold, developed framing styles rooted in the same scientific thinking that inspired their paintings. Many of them were influenced by the notion of "complementary colors" advanced by Michel Eugène Chevreul, a French organic chemist who is credited with inventing margarine and refining soap manufacture. Chevreul became interested in color after being put in charge of dyeing at a government-owned tapestry works. His ideas had a direct bearing on the Neo-Impressionist techniques of Seurat and Signac, whose method of rendering compound colors with small dots of primary color was intended to exploit the way the human eye perceives color. Chevreul also had ideas about frames. One of his experiments—putting the same lithograph in-

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side eight different-colored borders—seemed, to several of the Impressionists, to open exciting possibilities. Mary Cassatt mounted her pictures in red and green frames, not a single one of which survives. Pissarro explored the idea at an exhibition in 1880, and the result was described by Georges Lecomte, an art critic: “A predominantly red sunset had a green frame, a violet canvas had a matte yellow frame, a greenish spring scene was mounted in pink; the light gleamed, making everything more correct and harmonious.”

Pissarro eventually rejected this practice as distracting gimmickry—he called it *puffisme*—but Chevreul’s work did outline a further option. His comparative experiment had included, as a kind of control, a ninth border that was pure white—in his opinion, the most neutral color, and the one least likely to distort a picture. In the third Impressionist exhibition, Pissarro and Degas both put their pictures in plain white frames. “Resting Dancer,” a Degas painting from 1879—privately owned and still in a white frame—gives some idea of how these canvasses might have looked. The picture shows a ballerina in a moment of repose, her foot on a bench and her white skirt forming an almost perfect circle around her. The white frame, rather than harmonizing with the white of the skirt, seems to project the entire image forward, giving greater definition to the muted tones of the painting.

White frames quickly became associated with Impressionism. The Salon, the dominant institution in French art at the time, made conservative stipulations about how works should be presented, and in this context white frames were a radical departure. Mitchell and Roberts note that for many years Paul Durand-Ruel, a major Impressionist dealer, wouldn’t allow such frames in his galleries; one newspaper dismissed Pissarro’s white frames as resembling the “sides of crude packing cases.” Although most of the Impressionists used white frames at one time or another, no more than a handful exist today.

Occasionally, frame enthusiasts discover tantalizing glimpses of the past. A few years ago, Easton told me, she asked an intern to fetch the slide of a Degas pastel in the Brooklyn Museum’s collection. The intern, unfamiliar with the office layout, went to a drawer that was no longer used, and found a forgotten slide showing the picture in a white frame. The frame was almost certainly original; the painting had been sold at a Degas estate sale and came to the museum soon afterward. “It would have been the only white frame known that existed of this style,” Easton told me. “And the slide was dated 1968. So until 1968 this pastel lived in the original white frame.” It is now in a gilded frame.

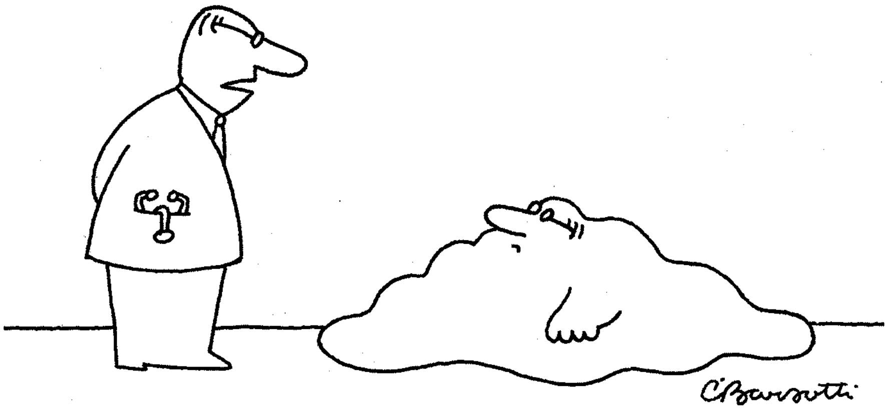
In 1887, Pissarro was preparing pictures for the Exposition Internationale, which forbade white frames, and attempted to create what has become known as his “compromise” frame. As he described it in letters to his son, the painter Lucien Pissarro, it was to have “a white margin of three centimetres around the painting, a flat surface of nine centimetres in oak, and, to finish, a three-centimetre band of gilded laurel leaf.” In this way, he hoped “to create harmony between other framings and my own, without destroying the harmony of my paintings.” Essentially, the sight edge of the frame would give Pissarro the white border he wanted, while the outer edge would placate dealers. But Pissarro’s effort was wasted. As Easton told me, “The dealer gilded his white sight edge in the three days between when he delivered the frame and the first view.”

A few years ago, Easton had a stroke of luck. She had gone to Switzerland to bring back a painting from an exhibition devoted to the work of Morisot. While there, she saw a Morisot on loan from the Davies Collection, at the National Museum Cardiff, in Wales. “I stopped dead in my tracks when I saw this picture,” she said. The frame looked uncannily like what Pissarro had described.

The Davies sisters, she explained, were the granddaughters of a nineteenth-century Welsh industrialist; they never married, and they became voracious collectors of art. The origins of the Morisot frame are unclear, but Easton pointed out that many of the Impressionists used the same framers—in particular, a talented young framer named Pierre Cluzel, who fashioned many of Degas’s tricky designs. (According to the staff of the Cardiff museum, the frame on the Morisot appears to be original.) Easton decided to use the frame as a basis for reframing the Brooklyn Pissarro. “First of all, it’s something that Pissarro wrote about. Second of all, it gives you a lot of the same compromises that he wanted at the time.” She also felt that the frame could pay homage to Pissarro’s adventurous taste in frames. With the exception of two antique frames that Pissarro may have painted on, and one sketch with a painted border, none of Pissarro’s frames have survived. But, working from the photographs and documentary sources, Easton hoped that she could bring one back to life.

Construction of the Pissarro frame took place at Gill and Lagodich’s studio, in Tribeca. Gill and Lagodich met through frames. Fifteen years ago, Gill was a freelance writer who had a summer job working for a gilding supplier; Lagodich kept coming in to buy gold. “He told me he wanted to read my

Old People in Hell
Brr.
They call this hot?
Where's my sweater?
WARP



"Be honest—how much are you exercising?"

• •

novel, and won me over—and he still hasn't read it," Gill claims. At the time, Lagodich was a landscape painter and frame collector who did gilding work on the side. (It sometimes seems as if everyone who works with frames began with pictures and then got sucked outward by the aesthetic equivalent of centrifugal force.) These days, Lagodich is in charge of restoration and fabrication, and Gill concentrates on research.

When Gill and Lagodich started their business, a few months after meeting, they ran it out of the loft on Duane Street where Lagodich has lived since the late seventies, but they now have a shop around the corner, which covers three floors. Their gallery is home to a large collection of European and American frames that spans five centuries. Almost everything is for sale, but there are some things they'd hate to part with. "There are certain frames that you just need to own, just to show that you're serious, that you have these objects," Lagodich said, as we looked at a huge gold frame, designed by Stanford White, that was an eye-popping mixture of Italian, German, and Dutch styles. "The problem is we started out as collectors," Lagodich said. "We like to keep nice things."

Construction takes place on Duane Street, and a month before the completed Pissarro frame was due Lagodich paced elatedly around the workshop, his clothes covered in white dust. The underlying carcass of the frame, a band of wood four and a quarter inches wide, was already complete; a concave section of its outer edge was being sanded by an assistant, using sandpaper wrapped around a dowel in order to get an even curve. Lagodich explained that the original frame would have been milled on a machine, so they were trying to re-create the effect by hand. "I like the challenge of these machine-perfect surfaces," he said, although the artisanal unevenness of a handmade surface that is actually meant to look handmade can be more fun. While the assistant sanded, Lagodich cast the laurel-and-berry border in plaster. (On the question of whether there would be a strip of wood between this ornament and the frame, Easton had prevailed: there was none.) The laurel band was mold-cast in sections, the joins masked by using a diagonal cut, so that a leaf overhung each crack. These sections allowed Lagodich to manipulate the pattern slightly, so that the laurel leaves fit the length of each side in a way that appeared organic and symmetrical.

While he waited for his work to dry, Lagodich, his fingers encrusted with plaster, ate a cookie and talked about the opposing dynamics of tradition and innovation in frame design. "I experiment with profiles all the time," he said, although, he added, "I feel like all profiles have been tried." He went on, "I have made so many frames for myself—and I have a lot in the basement, just my frames, that I've made—and they're all disasters, just disasters." He reflected on the curious way that a frame seems resistant to anything too stridently original. "I think that when you start changing the formula you're playing with forces that are very hard to control," he concluded darkly. Nonetheless, both he and Gill had become fascinated by Pissarro's attempt to balance different elements in a single frame. "It's a great transitional frame, where it still is nineteenth century but it's totally moving," Lagodich said. "I think that when this project is finished the painting's going to be sort of turned on *because* of the frame."

The next stage in the framing process is gilding, and this was done a week later by a gilder named Tom Middleton. There are two types of gilding—oil-based and water-based—and both were being used on this frame. Middleton, a thin, intense man with his hair in a ponytail, is, like Lagodich, a painter when he isn't working on frames. He circled the frame, waiting for oil that had been applied on the straight sections to acquire the right degree of adhesiveness for the gold to stick, while he burnished the water-gilt corner pieces with an agate stone and explained the mysteries of the gilder's craft: "It's almost a lost art now." Like many lost arts, gilding involves an esoteric set of tools, materials, and procedures. The bole, the layer of colored clay over which gold leaf is applied—this is often red, and frequently shows through old or deliberately distressed gilding—is made with rabbit-skin glue that smells like a pet store on a hot day. Gold leaf is traditionally cut on a pad made of deerskin or calfskin and protected from the wind with a flap of parchment. Before mechanical production techniques, when gold-beaters still hammered the metal, gold leaf was thicker, but modern gold is generally less than one micron thick; when Middleton held a piece of it up to the light, the fire escape outside was visible through it. Gold leaf weighs so little that if you pick it up with your hand it will instantly coat your fingers. So it is applied with slender brushes made from squirrel hair. As Middleton worked, he periodically stroked his arm with the brush, thereby picking up just enough oil from the skin to make the gold adhere to the bristles.

"This is tacking up now," he said, feeling the layer of oil with his hand. "The gold I'm using today is the most commonly used, twenty-three karat." Gold is a substance of almost limitless variety; there are different karats, different thicknesses, and different alloys, with names like régence and citron, and these differences, together with the bole and the burnishing, determine the final color. An alloy of silver brings a lemony tone, while a copper alloy yields a pinkish hue. Tracy Gill's favorite alloy is a French one, now rare, which contains palladium and appears tinged with violet. Middleton began to move quickly around the frame, pushing the gold down around the leaves and berries of the laurel border. Gill had mentioned that in some periods it was common to burnish those things which are hard in nature—the stems but not the petals, the quill but not the rest of the feather—but here the aim was to re-create the slightly dulled appearance of uniform oil-gilded surfaces prevalent at the time. The shinier effect of a burnished water-gilding would be reserved for the corners—a historically accurate choice, but also one that, aesthetically, would emphasize the rectangular structure of the frame, giving the curve of Pissarro's path something to contrast with.

After the arcane craft of gilding comes a process that is freer and more like art: toning the gold and distressing it, so that the frame does not look new. This involves scratching the surface, but, as with many other aspects of framing, the aim was to conceal the artifice. Middleton noted how adept the human eye is at spotting anything that seems patterned or intentional. Different people have different ways of mimicking the effect of chance. Lagodich likes using his keys; Middleton prefers stones. "Sometimes, on more beaten-up things, I've taken them outside and rubbed them around the sidewalk," he said. The goal is to create the illusion of haphazardness. "You want it to seem as if the object was hit randomly over the course of a hundred years," he said. "If I can fool the eye for a minute, I'm happy."

The completed frame arrived in Brooklyn only the day before it had to ship out to MOMA. In the peaceful precincts of the museum's conservation department, the de Keyser, now mended, sat on an easel, and the Pissarro wore its new frame. A few crumbs of gold leaf still clung to the cracks of the laurel border. The most immediate impression was that of informality. The expanse of wood in the sides of the frame implied something rustic. The bright white strip next to the canvas picked up the color of white-washed houses in the middle distance, and the shallow step in the wooden section drew the eye inward, guiding it through the trees to the roofs beyond.

Easton was uneasy, in the manner of someone who gets an adventurous haircut, then suffers a failure of nerve. "It just looks too new," she kept saying. The wood color, now that there was a whole frame's worth of it rather than just a corner sample, seemed too light. She asked a conservator to open the blinds so that she could see it in natural light. The sun streaming through the south-facing windows enhanced the play of color within the picture, but she still thought that the frame needed more warmth to bring out the tones of the roofs. Pissarro's roofs are a spectrum of reds and browns, an attempt to mimic the effect of a sunny day, so this was a trickier matter than simply matching a color. Easton asked if the frame's tone could be adjusted. The conservator touched the edge of the wood with his thumb. "It will certainly take some stain," he said.

Lagodich was brought back to work on the finish, further darkening the wood and distressing the gold. Even after the picture had gone to MOMA and the show was being hung, he was tinkering with the frame. Eventually, it looked as Easton had hoped it would, offering a subtle rebuke to some of the more ostentatious Baroque confections on display.

"I think it was more striking than any other frame in the exhibition, even though it was unassuming," Easton reflected later. "But that apparent simplicity was so much more difficult to realize than something more obviously sumptuous." The whole exhibition has since begun to tour. The reframed Pissarro is currently on display at the Musée d'Orsay, in Paris, home to perhaps the world's greatest collection of Impressionist paintings. "It's strange," Easton said. "We worked right up to the last minute, and now I won't get to see it again for almost a year. By the time it reënters the Brooklyn collection, it will seem almost like a new acquisition." She was looking forward to it. "The white next to the canvas really did enhance the play of color and light within the painting," she said. "And the area of unarticulated wood emphasized the blockiness of the palette-knife areas. And the gold edge attracted your attention to it." She added, "Ultimately, we did the things that Pissarro said he wanted." ♦

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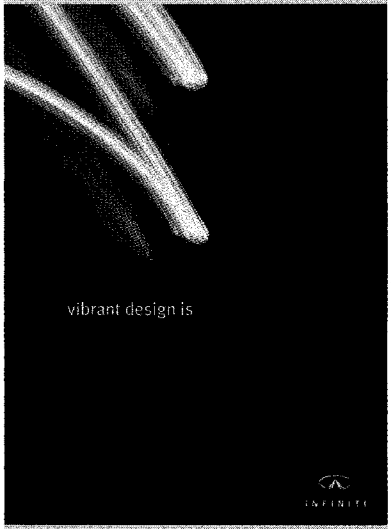

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PERSONAL HISTORY

ALICE, OFF THE PAGE

Expanding on—or maybe correcting—some of the things I wrote about my wife.

BY CALVIN TRILLIN

I

> Now that it's fashionable to reveal intimate details of married life, I can state publicly that my wife, Alice, has a weird predilection for limiting our family to three meals a day. —*"Alice, Let's Eat."*

There was one condolence letter that made me laugh. Naturally, a lot of them made me cry. Some of those, oddly enough, were from people who had never met Alice. They'd become familiar with her as a character in books and magazine pieces I'd written—light books and magazine pieces about travelling or eating or family life. Virtually all those letters began in the same way, with a phrase like "Even though I never really knew Alice . . ." I was certain of what Alice's response would have been. "They're right about that," she would have said. "They never knew me."

I once wrote that tales about writers' families tend to have a relation to real life that can be expressed in terms of standard network-television fare, on a spectrum that goes from sitcoms to Lifetime movies, and that mine were sitcoms. Now that I think of it, maybe they were more like the Saturday-morning cartoons. Alice played the role of the mom—the voice of reason, the sensible person who kept everything on an even keel despite the antics of her marginally goofy husband. Years ago, at a conference of English teachers where we were both speakers, the professor who did the introductions said something like "Alice and Bud are like Burns and Allen, except she's George and he's Gracie." Yes, of course, the role she played in my stories was based on the role she played in our family—our daughters and I sometimes called her T.M., which stood for The Mother—but she didn't play it in the broad strokes of a sitcom mom. Also, she was never completely comfortable as the person who takes responsibility for keeping things on an even keel; that person inevitably misses out on some of the fun. ("I feel the need to break out of the role of straight person," she said in a *Nation* review of "Alice, Let's Eat" that cautioned readers against abandoning long-planned European vacations in order to scour the country for "the perfect roast polecat haunch.") The sitcom presentation sometimes made her sound stern as well as wise, and she was anything but stern. She had something close to a child's sense of wonderment. She was the only adult I ever knew who might respond to encountering a deer on a forest path by saying, "Wowsers!"

Once, during a question-and-answer period that followed a speech I had given at the Herbst Theatre, in San Francisco, someone asked how Alice felt about the way she was portrayed in my books and articles. I said that she thought the portrayal made her sound like what she called "a dietitian in sensible shoes." Then the same questioner asked if Alice was in the audience, and, when I said she was, he asked if she'd mind standing up. Alice stood. As usual, she looked smashing. She didn't say anything. She just leaned over and took off one of her shoes—shoes that looked like they cost about the amount of money required in some places to tide a family of four over for a year or two—and, smiling, waved it in the air. She wasn't a dietitian in sensible shoes, and she would have been right in saying that the people whose exposure to her had been through my stories didn't know her. Still, in the weeks after she died I was touched by their letters. They may not have known her, but they knew how I felt about her. It surprised me that they had managed to divine that from reading stories that were essentially sitcoms. Even after I'd taken in most episodes of "The Honeymooners," after all, it had never occurred to me to ponder the feelings Ralph Kramden must have had for Alice Kramden. Yet I got a lot of letters like the one from a young woman in New York who wrote that she sometimes looked at her boyfriend and thought, "But will he love me like Calvin loves Alice?"

The letter that made me laugh was from Roger Wilkins. Roger now occupies a chair of history and American culture at George Mason University, but in the seventies he was on the editorial board of the *Times*. In that period, I'd sometimes join the regular lunches he had with the late Richard Harris—a remarkable investigative reporter for *The New Yorker* who had the aggressively unsentimental world view often found among people in his line of work. Alice and Roger became acquainted when she accompanied me to a conference I was covering in New Orleans. In off hours, when we'd gather around the hotel swimming pool, she and Roger sometimes had long, serious conversations. It wasn't unusual for me to find Alice having long, serious conversations with people I'd been bantering with for years. She got engaged with people's lives. If she said to a friend's son or daughter, "How's school?," she wasn't just being polite; she wanted details, and she wasn't shy about offering advice. If people we were visiting mentioned that they'd been thinking about renovating their house, Alice was right on the case, room by room. In such architectural conversations, she could get bossy, and sometimes I felt obliged to warn our hosts that one of her characteristic gestures—the gesture she used when she was saying something like "You have to open all of this up"—was remarkably similar to the gesture you'd use to toss money into the wind.

She wasn't among those whose response to tragedy or loss was limited to offering the conventional expressions of sympathy before moving on with their own lives. In 1988, an old friend phoned us to say that his grown daughter, a young woman we'd known since she was a child, had been raped by an in-

COURTESY CALVIN TRILLIN

The Trillins leaving the London registry office where they were married, on August 13, 1965.

truder. This was a dozen years after Alice had been operated on for lung cancer, and among the things that she wrote to our friend's daughter was that having lung cancer and being raped were comparable only in that both were what she called "realizations of our worst nightmares." She said that there was some relief at surviving what you might have thought was not survivable. "No one would ever choose to have cancer or to be raped," she wrote. "But you don't get to choose, and it is possible at least to understand what Ernest Becker meant when he said something like 'To live fully is to live with an awareness of the rumble of terror that underlies everything,' or to begin to understand the line in 'King Lear'—'Ripeness is all.' You might have chosen to become ripe less dramatically or dangerously, but you can still savor ripeness." Alice had a large envelope in which she kept copies of letters like that—along with copies of some letters she had sent the girls and copies of poems we had written for her on birthdays and documents like the announcement of a prize for community service that Abigail, our older daughter, had been awarded at Yale and an astonishing letter of recommendation that a professor had provided for Sarah, our younger daughter, when she applied for her first job after getting her M.S.W. On the envelope was written "Important Stuff."

In his condolence letter, Roger talked partly about that engaged quality in Alice, but he also got around to her appearance. "She was nice and she was concerned and she was smart and when she talked to you, she was thinking about you, and, also, she was so very pretty," he wrote in September of 2001, a few days after Alice died. "I always thought of you as a wonderful guy, but still I couldn't figure out how you managed to get Alice. Harris once told me it was just dumb luck." When I read that, I burst out laughing. Harris had nailed it again.

II

> When approached by young people in search of wisdom about how they might go about linking up with someone with whom they are likely to enjoy a long and happy marriage, the only strategy I can divine from what passed for my wife-seeking activities is "Wander into the right party."
>
> —*"Family Man."*

The party was thrown in late 1963 by *Monocle,* a doomed magazine of political satire. In that period, three or four other couples with connections to *Monocle* met and eventually married; those unions, which we called "Monocle marriages" in our house, were all long-lasting. I have reminded the founder of *Monocle*—Victor Navasky, who is fortunate enough to have a *Monocle* marriage himself—that his brainchild proved to be more durable as a marriage brokerage than as a magazine. In Alice's view, *Monocle* had existed in order to get everyone married, and, once that had occurred, it quite naturally folded.

"I went on spring break a boy and came back an alcoholic."

When I saw Alice at that *Monocle* party, she was wearing a hat. At least, I've always remembered her as wearing a hat. She later insisted that she'd never owned a hat of the sort I described. Maybe, but I can still see her in the hat—a white hat, cocked a bit to the side. Her cheeks were slightly flushed. She had blond hair, worn straight in those days, and a brow just a shade darker than her hair. (Our oldest grandchild, Isabelle Alice, who's almost four, has precisely that coloring, which may be one reason I sometimes have trouble taking my eyes off her.) Whether or not Alice was wearing a hat was not the only difference in the way we recalled that meeting. Although Alice's father had grown up in rural North Carolina, in a Southern Baptist family named Stewart, her mother was Jewish—a fact that was to come as a great relief to my own Jewish mother, once I reminded her that, according to the ancient Hebraic belief in matrilineal descent, anyone whose mother was Jewish is herself Jewish. Although some people thought that Alice looked like the quintessential shiksa, I always claimed that when I spotted her across the room that night I asked Navasky, "Who's that cute little Jewish girl over by the punch bowl?" Alice always said that I'd made up that story and that, furthermore, there wasn't any punch bowl.

She was, as Roger Wilkins later wrote, so very pretty, but that wasn't the first thing that struck me about her; it might have come as much as two or three seconds later. My first impression was that she looked more alive than anyone I'd ever seen. She seemed to glow. For one reason or another, I hardly got to speak to her that evening. Two weeks later, though, after doing some intelligence work and juggling some obligations and dismissing as hearsay the vague impression of one mutual acquaintance that Alice was virtually engaged, I dashed back from a remote suburb to a party that I figured she'd be attending. So I couldn't claim that I just wandered into that second party; in romantic matters, even those who need to depend mainly on dumb luck are usually up to one or two deliberate moves. At the second party, I did get to talk to her quite a lot. In fact, I must have hardly shut up. I was like a lounge comic who had been informed that a booker for the "Tonight Show" was in the audience. Recalling that party in later years, Alice would sometimes say, "You have never again been as funny as you were that night."

"You mean I peaked in December of 1963?" I'd say, twenty or even thirty years later.

"I'm afraid so."

But I never stopped trying to match that evening—not just trying to entertain her but trying to impress her. Decades later—after we had been married for more than thirty-five years, after our girls were grown—I still wanted to impress her. I still knew that if I ever disappointed her in some fundamental way—if I ever caused her to conclude that, after all was said and done, she should have said no when, at the end of that desperate comedy routine, I asked her if we could have dinner sometime—I would have been devastated.

A year before Alice died, I read an obituary in the *Times* of Mary Francis, who had been married to the English mystery novelist Dick Francis for fifty-three years. "I don't think I shall write again other than letters now," Dick Francis was quoted as saying. "So much of my work was her." Apparently, Mary Francis had been such an active participant in her husband's work, particularly in the matter of research, that he considered the novels a joint effort. She had been well educated, and Dick Francis was conscious of being a novelist who had left school at fifteen to become a jockey. The article implied that he might not be able to produce a book without her help. But I read his reluctance to write novels without her another way. As I understood what he was saying, she was the one he'd been trying to impress.

I showed Alice everything I wrote in rough draft—partly because I valued her opinion but partly because I hoped to impress her. If the piece was meant to be funny, the sound of laughter from the next room was a great reward. When I wrote in the dedication of a book "For Alice," I meant it literally. In that sense, the headline on her obituary in the *Times* was literally true, as well as in the correct order: it described her as "Educator, Author and Muse." When Alice died, I was going over the galleys of a novel about parking in New York—a subject so silly that I think I would have hesitated to submit the book to a publisher if she hadn't, somewhat to her surprise, liked it. When the novel was published, the dedication said, "I wrote this for Alice. Actually, I wrote everything for Alice."

III

A Conversation with Someone Who Can't Believe That Alice Is Fifty

"No way," you say.
"It simply cannot be.
I would have guessed
That barmen often ask her for I.D."
"I know, I know.
She has that youthful glow
That still gives young men vapors.
She's fifty, though.
I've seen her papers."

—*"Family Man."*

It had never occurred to me that being pretty involved complications. It wasn't the sort of problem I'd ever had to face. Of course, there are also plenty of advantages to being pretty. Like a lot of attractive women, for instance, Alice regularly drove over the speed limit, secure in the knowledge that every policeman who had ever stopped her for speeding had given her a warning rather than a summons. At parties, she often attracted what I called "guys smoking pipes," who wanted to impress her with their suavity or intellectual range. "He wasn't smoking a pipe, by the way," she'd say, knowing just which guy I was talking about when I mentioned "that guy with a pipe" as we discussed a party on the way home. "In fact, I can't remember any of those 'guys smoking pipes' who actually were smoking pipes."

"Is that right?" I'd say. "I could have sworn he was tamping down the tobacco, or whatever they do, when he made that remark about the flaws in Derrida's thinking."

I wasn't surprised that Alice attracted guys with pipes. They didn't mean any harm, and I'm hardly in a position to criticize people for trying to impress her. What did surprise me was that some men were hostile to her before she'd said any more than "Nice to meet you." Every once in a while, some man who'd just met Alice—I remember a lawyer in the South of France, for instance, and a financier in Manhattan—seemed intent on being contentious or even offensive from the start, maybe as some sort of preëmptive strike. Somewhat more often, there was a quieter hostility from women. Not long after we were married, I told her I'd noticed something about her response to couples we met: when she said something like "That was fun; I hope we see them again," the female half of the couple was likely to be, in addition to her other qualities, physically attractive. "Do you feel more comfortable with attractive women because you don't have to worry about being resented?" I asked. She looked at me as if I'd intruded on something that was meant to be private.

The normal complications of prettiness were exacerbated by the fact that Alice didn't look like who she was. At first meeting, her looks—particularly when coupled with clothes of the sort that no dietitian had ever worn and the superficial facts of her background (Westchester County, Wellesley)—could make people expect someone who acted pampered or snooty. Among people who went to public high schools in the fifties, as we both did, pretty girls weren't expected to be smart or even especially nice. Pretty was enough. Alice always insisted that in high school she wasn't known as the class beauty but, embarrassingly enough, as the class brain—an embarrassment that was memorialized in her high-school yearbook by the pairing of her picture with a picture of the smartest boy in the class, a geeky slide-rule specialist in the days before the computer age saved geeky boys from eternal damnation. She often mentioned that in high school she'd been rejected at the cheerleading tryouts year after year and that, presumably because of her reputation as the class brain, she was virtually never asked out.

Her parents hadn't been able to afford any serious pampering. An only child, she grew up among the prosperous suburbanites of Westchester County in a family that was always in precarious shape financially. Her father, who had left North Carolina as a teen-ager and never returned, was an inventor, self-taught. In the thirties, he had hit the jackpot with some early coin-changers for vending machines. He got an office in the Empire State Building, where, as it happened, Alice's mother was working in the secretarial pool. They bought a large stone house, with an elaborate swimming pool and a basement bowling alley, in Greenhaven—an expensive community on Long Island Sound whose residents, in Alice's childhood memories, were exquisitely conscious of their material possessions and of having a couple of neighbors whose names resonated in Hollywood. But the company he'd founded to manufacture and market his inventions went under at about the time Alice was born. He never hit the jackpot again. As far as I can tell, he got by after that mostly with research-and-development money from a series of investors. Until the Stewarts moved to a more modest place, in Harrison, when Alice was about thirteen, they held on to the big house only by renting it during the summer while Alice went to a sleep-away camp, chosen partly for its reasonable fees, and her parents lived in a sublet apartment.

SOME LINES AGAINST THE LIGHT

How awful the light is for the eyes.
How awful it is to be flooded with light,
how unpleasant to be David's Citadel or the Wailing Wall
or an actor
or something like that.
How awful is the light left on in the henhouse
by wily farmers
so that the hens will lay and lay
thinking it is forever day.
How awful of the light in this way to sow feelings,
to be leaping, always to begin loving anew,
to spew love.
Sometimes I stumble into history
the way a small animal, a rabbit or a fox,
stumbles into a passing car's beam of light.
Sometimes I am the driver.

—*Yehuda Amichai*

(*Translated, from the Hebrew, by Leon Wieseltier.*)

Alice's father was a sweet man—too openhearted, I always supposed, to be in business. He was enormously optimistic, a quality that Alice thought she'd inherited pretty much intact. "You said that much of what appears to be optimism is actually denial," she once wrote our younger daughter, Sarah. "You are right about this. My dad was in denial much of the time." Once, after Alice's father was too old to be chasing investors who shared his dreams about, say, a vending machine for dispensing *Playboy* magazines, he and Alice's mother, who was then slipping into what turned out to be early-onset Alzheimer's, had a serious house fire. It was a disaster that followed a series of setbacks, all of which Alice had somehow managed to straighten out. I remember him patting Alice on the hand the day after the fire and saying, "I don't want you to worry about anything, sweetie." I know he genuinely meant it, even though if Alice had not worried about anything he would have been a goner.

When we were in our early thirties, it occurred to me that one way to divide the people we knew was that some of them were still dependent on their parents—financially or emotionally or some other way—and some of them had seen that role ended or even reversed. I never embarked on a study to see if that distinction was a predictor of how people handled what has to be handled to get through life—the small matters of logistics and maintenance that were known around our house as Administrative Caca, or serious issues of, say, catastrophic illness or financial disaster—but I suppose I always assumed that Alice's early responsibility for her parents had something to do with her tendency to sit down and systematically deal with whatever problem came up.

By the time I met her—she was in her mid-twenties then, teaching English at Hofstra University—she had already taken out bank loans to tide her father over when there was a dry period between investors. In the late seventies, she wrote an article about her parents that began, "When my daughter Abigail was three and my mother was sixty-three, Abigail said to me, 'Mommy, why is it that sometimes you seem like the mommy and Grandma seems like the little girl?'" Usually, Alice was also involved in taking care of someone else—a former student who couldn't find a job or a friend who was having difficulty coping or a great-aunt who couldn't manage to work through the maze required to become eligible for Medicaid or, increasingly, someone who was trying to deal with the terrors and bewildering logistics of being treated for cancer. There were so many cancer patients, and Alice's involvement in their cases was so complete that I half expected a man from the New York State Board of Regents to walk in one day and accuse her of practicing medicine without a license. At Alice's memorial service, our friend Nora Ephron described those under Alice's protection as "anyone she loved, or liked, or knew, or didn't quite know but knew someone who did, or didn't know from a hole in a wall but had just gotten a telephone call from because they'd found the number in the telephone book."

Sometimes, noticing the sour expression of a woman sitting across a table from us, I wanted to say, "It's not Alice's fault how she looks," but that wouldn't have been quite true. She took some care to look pretty. She liked being pretty, usually. Who wouldn't? Traffic policemen are not the only people who tend to respond differently to a pretty woman. A couple of years after Sarah was born—Alice would have been thirty-five—someone we knew was, for his sins, put in charge of a fashion issue of the *Times*

Magazine, and he decided to skip professional models in favor of working women, who would be pictured wearing the new spring lines. The editor asked Alice if she'd be willing to be included. The customary promises were made about the marvellous prints we'd get of the pictures that a well-known photographer, Doug Kirkland, would take of Alice and maybe of Abigail and Sarah as well. Although Alice had been in similar spreads in college, she had some misgivings. Eventually, she agreed to participate, partly because the embarrassment potential of the accompanying article was somewhat limited by the fact that I was to write it. (In it, I said that, since I'd never seen Alice read a fashion magazine, the fact that she was able to answer in detail when I asked her about someone's bizarre outfit always stunned me, "as if I had idly wondered out loud about the meaning of some inscription on some ruin in Oaxaca and she had responded by translating fluently from the Toltec.") The *Times* headline said "COLLEGE INSTRUCTOR, MOTHER AND WIFE."

Later, when writing about how dealing with her parents' problems sometimes made her feel as helpless as she had felt as a child, she said, "When some pictures of me and my children appeared in the fashion section of the *Times*, I found that although I was uncomfortable at the thought that any of my students might see such a frivolous portrayal of me, I was anxious that some of the doctors who had condescended to me over the phone see what a truly acceptable person I was. I even brought an extra copy of the magazine to my father so that he could show it to the people at the nursing home where he and my mother were then living, as if the nurses would respond more quickly to their calls if they had seen their daughter in the *Times*. And I believed they would have. Because when dealing in this area I was reduced to the values of Greenhaven in about 1948, when I was ten."

We did indeed get some nice prints from the photo shoot. One of them is still on my bedside table. It's a portrait of Alice in a hat. That was not the picture on the cover of the program at her memorial service. The picture on the program—chosen because I knew it was one of Alice's favorites—was taken on a trip to Italy to celebrate her fiftieth birthday. Eleven years after that trip, I wrote a sequel to her fiftieth-birthday poem called "An Explanation to Someone Who Still Finds It Hard to Believe Alice Is Fifty—Eleven Years Later." The first stanza was:

"You josh, by gosh,
Or need some better specs.
The lass I see
Must surely be
From Generation X."
Yes, still, they stare,
They're dazzled by her flair.
The sight of her sends young men's hearts askew.
So how come she remembers World War II?

Around that time, while we were spending the weekend at a place we had in New Jersey, Alice returned from an annual trip she made to a plant nursery and said, "Well, it's happened."

"What's happened?"

"I got a speeding ticket," she said. "It was the same cop who gave me a warning in the same spot when I went to get the plants last year."

"But I think maybe that's what a warning means," I said. "If you do it again in the same place, they're pretty much obligated to give you a ticket, even if you're an absolute knockout."

She seemed not to have heard that. "I guess I've lost my looks," she said.

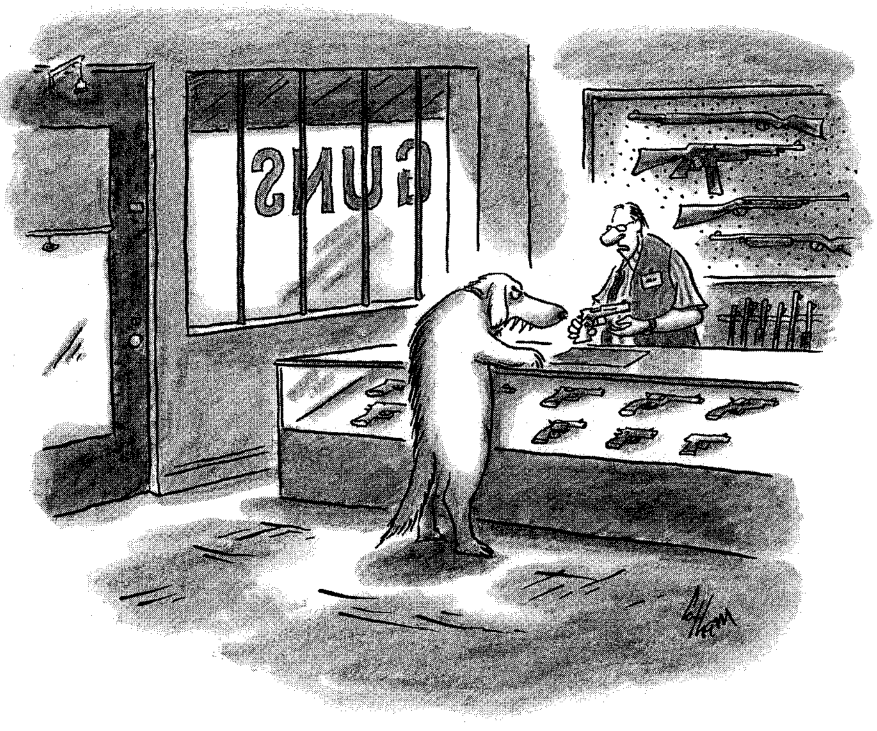
"I hear they're taking in a lot of gay cops these days," I said. "We're all in favor of that, of course, but it's bound to change the whole equation."

She smiled. She didn't laugh, but she smiled.

IV

> Having a family intellectual available, I can always arrange to have words like "holistic" or "heuristics" translated if it should prove absolutely necessary—if they turn up on a road sign, for instance, or on a menu or on a visa application.
>
> —"*Uncivil Liberties*."

Sometime in the late sixties, I happened to mention to an older writer at *The New Yorker* that I showed Alice my rough drafts. He told me, in an avuncular way, that this was unwise. He pointed out that the response to a rough draft hoped for by any writer, even one who knew full well the weaknesses of the manuscript he'd just handed over, was "Brilliant! Don't change a word!" Honest responses on a regular basis, he said, would be a strain on any marriage, and he had no doubt that honest responses were what I'd get from Alice. He was right about that: sometimes I could actually hear an occasional sigh as she read a draft, a sign that the report was not going to be cheerful. I told him that what he'd said made a lot of sense, but that it was too late for me to take his advice. I said, "If I thought that there was



"Still, I hope you won't give up barking entirely."

"Hey, don't blame me. I don't make the laws—I just circumvent them."

• •

any chance I could get along without it, I would."

It wasn't as if I had married a biologist or a financial analyst. Alice had a particular talent for reading people's manuscripts and offering constructive criticism; she regularly did it for friends, including one who had written a sixteen-hundred-page novel. (She suggested some cuts.) She had a great eye, and, like Mary Francis, she was better educated than her husband. She had spent a year in the graduate program in English at Yale. She had copy-edited books at Random House. She taught English and composition in college for years. She had designed the content for an educational-television series about the writing process. When she felt she had something to say, she became a writer herself, often on the subject of coping with serious illness. I regularly run into people who tell me how deeply affected they were by "Of Dragons and Garden Peas," a 1981 *New England Journal of Medicine* piece by Alice that's still used in some medical-school courses; or by a *New Yorker* piece that she wrote in 2001 about the decisions that had to be made a decade earlier after a collection of symptoms seemed to indicate a recurrence of the cancer she'd had in 1976; or by "Dear Bruno," a book based on a letter she had sent to Victor and Annie Navasky's son, then twelve, after it was discovered that he had a malignant tumor in his chest. You could say, I suppose, that she was in the English-language business, and I was her sideline—the pro-bono case being handled by a high-powered corporate lawyer. That sort of help wasn't easy to turn down.

She actually did translate words like "heuristics" for me. Usually, though, what I was asking was more on the level of what some foreign-language movie we'd seen was about. "I don't get it," I'd say. "Was that a swimming movie?"

"It was not a swimming movie."

"Well, they seemed to be in the water most of the time."

Around the time Alice and I met, the coverage of American racism finally burst out of its regional boundaries; Northern universities were beginning to look into what they were doing to educate minority students who were, by conventional measurements, not qualified for admission. Alice got involved in a small program of that sort at Hofstra, and in 1967 she moved to City College to teach in a program called SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge), which employed remedial courses and tutoring and counselling and stipends as a way to integrate underprepared students. A friend of hers at Hofstra, Mina Shaughnessy, went to City with her, and for the next dozen years they were allies in the intense struggle over the role that a place like the City University of New York should play in what was sometimes known as remedial education.

From the start, some senior professors had been muttering about the decline of standards. As academic jobs began to dry up, some younger faculty members—people who had looked forward to a life of dropping graceful aperçus about "The Waste Land" to enthralled students on ivy-covered campuses—were dispirited or even enraged at finding themselves instead in gritty urban universities, correcting seemingly endless errors in grammar and syntax. Alice and Mina, who were there because they wanted to be, had a completely different response. It was encapsulated in the title of a speech with which Mina, by then a star in a field that hadn't been expected to produce any stars, electrified an annual meeting of the Modern Language Association, in 1975: "Diving In." Instead of throwing up her hands in despair at all the errors her students made, Mina had analyzed four thousand essays, found patterns of errors that could be addressed, and explained all this, in a tone of optimism and commitment and absolute confidence, in a book called "Errors and Expectations." In later years, when Alice was producing programs for educational television, she'd occasionally take an unusual teaching job—at Phoenix House, the drug-treatment program, for a while, and for one semester at Sing Sing—and she always took it for granted that people who wanted to learn could be taught, no matter what their background.

Mina was fourteen years older than Alice—in a way a mentor and in another way a big sister. She had no children, and for our girls she became something like a fairy godmother; she once convinced Abigail that the necklace she was about to hand over had been given to her on the subway by a princess who was changing professions—getting out of the princess game—and therefore no longer had need of it. Mina was marvellous-looking—the actress Maggie Smith was usually mentioned by those describing her—and she wore marvellous clothes. If Alice had ever been in danger of accepting the notion that doing good works carried a mandatory requirement for dowdiness, Mina's example would have been enough to convince her otherwise. A biography of Mina by Jane Maher includes an anecdote told often by the scholar and critic Irving Howe, who had become one of Mina's great admirers at CUNY: When she met him one day at the graduate center, having come directly from teaching a class, he commented on her outfit and asked if Mina's students, virtually all of whom were strapped for cash as well as for correct verb endings, were put off by her stunning clothes. "But Irving," she replied. "My students know I dress up for them."

Apparently, she had also dressed up for doctors and nurses and medical technicians. Mina had been operated on for ovarian cancer at thirty-eight, the age Alice was when she was operated on for lung cancer, and I think it was from her that Alice learned the morale-boosting value of showing up for treatment looking your best. It also occurs to me that Alice responded to having cancer the way she and Mina had responded to what at first seemed the insurmountable academic problems of their students. Alice said in a speech once that the worst thing cancer can do is to rob you of your identity. Her identity included engagement and optimism and enthusiasm. One of the most negative words she could use in describing someone was "passive." I don't think I ever saw Alice just sit back and observe a group conversation; she was always a participant. After she'd had surgery and radiation at New York Hospital, she was discouraged from investigating what other treatment she could get at Memorial Sloan-Kettering; among some non-cancer doctors at that time, Memorial had a reputation for subjecting patients to debilitating protocols that might be more valuable for long-term research than for the patient's well-being. But Alice was accustomed to attacking a problem partly by seeking out the people who knew the most about it. Looking back years later, she thought it unlikely that the additional treatment she received at Memorial made any difference in her condition, but she liked it there. Among other things, she liked being in a place where the doctors had seen some people get well.

Alice's response to having cancer was a reminder that an intellectual is not just someone who might be able to translate "heuristics" or someone who liked to spend her summers reading nineteenth-century novels or a pile of biographies of physicists. It's someone whose instinct is to analyze anything that happens and try to make some sense out of it. "Of Dragons and Garden Peas" was not an account of the doctors Alice had seen and the procedures she'd undergone. It was an essay on how having cancer is "an embodiment of the existential paradox that we all experience: we feel that we are immortal, yet we know that we will die." She examined the talismans people with grave illnesses use to distance themselves from death—the magic of doctors, the power of the will to live, a concentration on the details of daily life (like growing peas in Nova Scotia, where we lived in the summer). They all had limits, she concluded, mentioning a friend who "wanted to live more than anyone I have ever known. The talisman of will didn't work for her." The reference was to Mina, whose cancer returned and metastasized about the time that Alice had finally managed to get back to her garden peas. After a year and a half—and eight operations—Mina was dead.

V

To state the provisions of the Alice Tax simply, which is the only way Alice allows them to be stated, it calls for this: after a certain level of income, the government would simply take everything. When Alice says confiscatory, she means confiscatory.

—*"Too Soon to Tell."*

She didn't delude herself about the chances of the Alice Tax being passed, but she did believe that it would have been a good idea. She thought that, in a country where millions of children didn't have adequate food or access to a doctor, there should be a limit to how much people could keep for themselves—a generous limit, maybe, but still a limit. She believed in the principle of enoughness. Somehow, the Alice Tax came up in conversation most often when we were with people whose incomes would probably have made them subject to its provisions. This did not surprise me. Alice had what I once described as an "instinctual attraction for avoided subjects"—a description I used in the context of a dinner we once had with a man described by the friends who brought him along as a "sugar baron." Somehow, by the end of that meal, the connection between sugar and rotten teeth had come up in conversation three times.

There were things she didn't like, and she was never shy about saying so. She didn't like clubs, or just about any institution that excluded anybody. She couldn't understand why anyone would accept an invitation to join a club, and the fact that there were people in New York who would actually go out of their way to get into a club just made her shake her head. Her attitude toward religion was somewhere between uninterested and hostile, except that she claimed to believe that you could hear what your children said about you at your funeral. She didn't like games—athletic games, board games, any games. In the spring of 2001, she had a bypass operation—the massive radiation she'd had twenty-five years before had eventually damaged her arteries and her heart—and afterward the surgeon asked me if she was someone for whom, say, tennis was important. When I mentioned that to Sarah—this was before I looked back and realized that this question was among the things he said that had begun to scare me—Sarah said, "I think you could honestly say that she's never played a game."

That was almost true. A friend she was fond of sometimes ordered guests to divide into teams for charades, and Alice didn't refuse to play even if she did grumble a bit. All of Alice's rules were subject to occasional exceptions, usually dependent on how she felt about the person in question. She considered my membership in a Yale senior society terminally silly—she would have expected me to renounce it, or at least make fun of it—but when the subject came up I always had the feeling that she was struggling to be merely sarcastic rather than completely contemptuous. People we had come to know because a goddaughter of mine married into their family have some involvement in the cigarette business, and Alice, who could be frank enough on that subject to provoke a shouting match at a dinner party, never mentioned it in their presence. I realized that, because I thought of my goddaughter as family, they'd been granted a sort of family easement.

Easements on the subject of cigarettes were not given casually. Alice hated cigarettes. Cigarette companies did not anger her as much as those who did the companies' marketing for them by giving young people—particularly young women—the notion that smoking was a hip way to defy those square goody-goodies sometimes referred to as the smoking police. Given three overwhelming facts that she was always ready to quote—that lung cancer kills more women than breast cancer and ovarian cancer combined, that almost ninety per cent of lung-cancer cases are caused by smoking and are therefore avoidable, and that the number of young women who take up cigarettes was rising each year—Alice thought that anybody who made smoking seem appealing was doing something that bordered on the criminal.

In 1999, a piece in the *Times* Style section portrayed a Manhattan "cigarette lounge" as an attractive and sophisticated and even sweet-smelling sanctuary where smokers, safe from their hectoring families, could enjoy a quiet drink or hold a private party—including, one waitress was quoted as saying, a recent baby shower at which everybody smoked. Alice was enraged. In an article in *The Nation*, she wrote, "I have always been puzzled that anyone thinks women who smoke are cool, probably because my mother...was the least cool person I have ever known. I guess she thought she looked good when she started smoking as a teenager, but by the time I knew her she was pathetically addicted to cigarettes, always desperately trying to stop." In the piece, Alice mentioned that she admired Julia Roberts for working as a volunteer counsellor at the Hole in the Wall Gang Camp, a camp in Connecticut for children with cancer and other serious illnesses—Alice was on the board, and we were volunteer counsellors as well—but had to wonder "how many young women had started smoking because of how appealing Roberts made it look in "My Best Friend's Wedding."

Alice had never smoked, but her mother was a chain-smoker and her father smoked cigars constantly. She didn't claim to know if the clouds of smoke she had grown up in were responsible for her lung cancer, but she was certain that her parents, who were exceedingly protective, would never have raised her in a house full of smoke if they had understood the danger it presented. She had testified to that effect in the late eighties, when the city held hearings on whether to ban smoking in restaurants—a ban that passed and was eventually extended to bars. By that time, she had allied herself with a loose band of anti-smoking crusaders led by the late William Cahan, a renowned thoracic surgeon at Memorial Sloan-Kettering, who was even more dangerous at a dinner party than Alice was, since he had access to X-rays of lungs devastated by cigarette smoking. In the version of her testimony that ran as an Op-Ed piece in the *Times*, under the heading "FOR A SMOKING BAN IN NEW YORK CITY," she said, "I ask the city to ban smoking in public places because I want to do for my children what my parents would have certainly done for me, had they known what we know today." Actually, she hadn't left that completely up to the city. The girls were only four and seven when Alice was operated on, but when they got old enough to understand she sat them down and told them that, given her illness, we had to face up to the possibility that a genetic predisposition to lung cancer existed in our family. Everything else that could be a part of a teen-ager's life was discussable, she said, but cigarette smoking was out. She was at that moment at her bossiest, and both girls took her at her word.

VI

Alice's Law of Compensatory Cash Flow holds that any money not spent on a luxury you can't afford is the equivalent of windfall income.

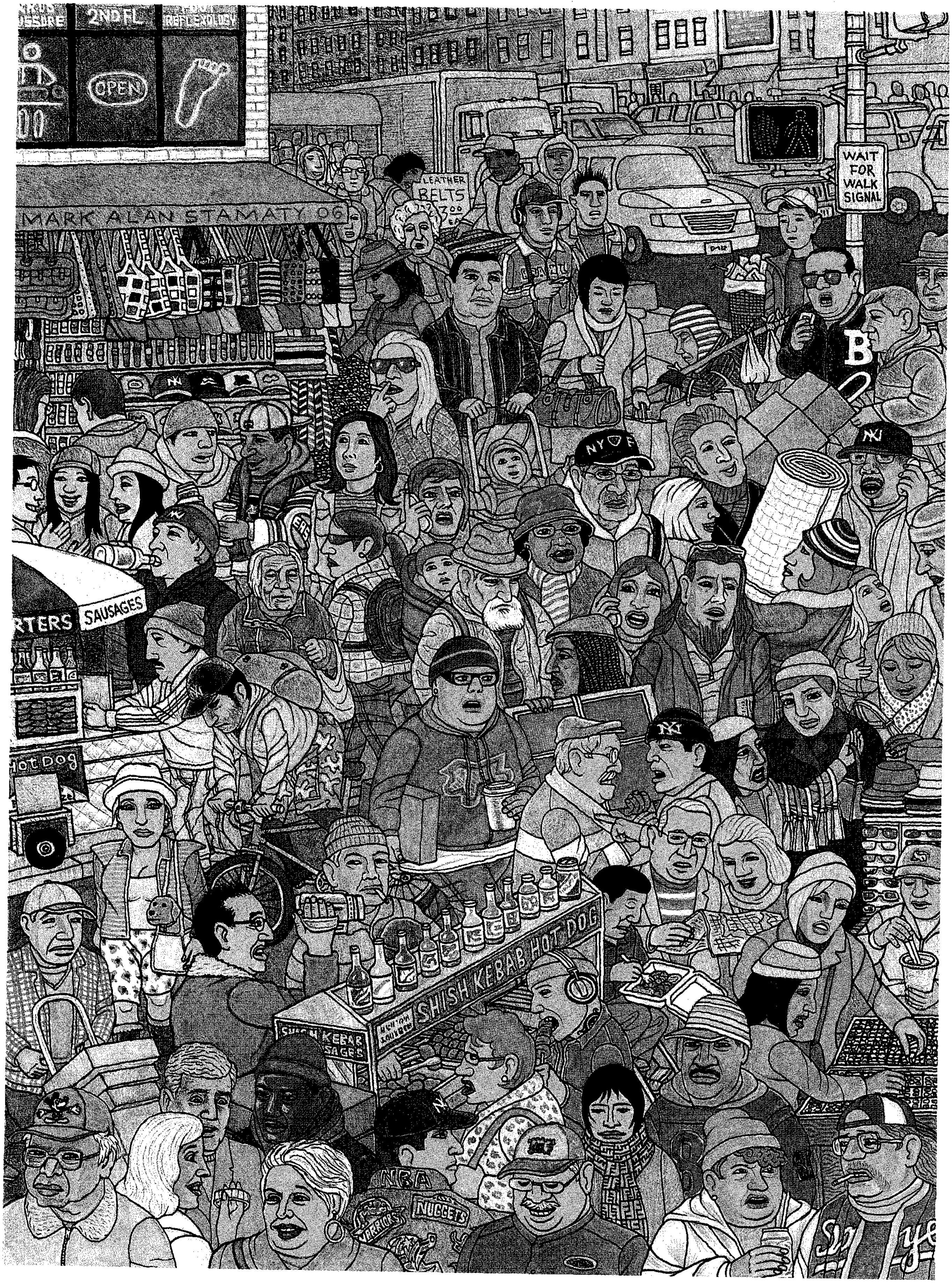
—*"Words, No Music."*

It's true that she tended to be the instigator of our family's money-spending schemes, but most luxuries didn't interest her. She didn't want expensive jewelry. She never wore perfume, expensive or otherwise. She couldn't imagine anything dumber than spending a lot of money on a flashy car or boat. Although she sometimes talked about how it might be fun to go to a chic spa and she always said she didn't see anything wrong with cosmetic plastic surgery, she never got around to either one. When she finally decided to buy a fur coat—she insisted on buying that and all of those other fancy clothes with money she had earned—she said that she wanted it only because of how cold she got during a New York winter, although the girls and I teased her by suggesting other ways of staying warm. She liked to travel, and she loved beautiful clothes. She liked living in nice surroundings. Her phrase for the opposite was "living like a graduate student."

Before we were married, she accepted the notion that she would have to make do with something like graduate-student possessions. "I had always assumed that writers were poor," she wrote in the article about her parents, "which at the time was fine with me." She was surprised that, through what she characterized in that article as "a complete lack of concern for possessions and a devotion to the clothes he had bought during his freshman year at college," her future husband had accumulated enough money for a down payment on a brownstone in Greenwich Village—a brownstone with a couple of rent-controlled tenants and a serious need of renovation, but, still, a brownstone in Greenwich Village.

It has occurred to me—again, I've done no systematic study—that among married couples the person who actually makes out the mortgage check is likely to be more cautious about spending money than the person who doesn't. No matter where the money comes from, according to this untested theory, there is something sobering about sending away that much of it every month in the knowledge that, rain or shine, you'll have to come up with the same amount of money the next month and the month after that. I made out the mortgage check in our house, but there were a lot of other factors, some of which weren't obviously connected to luxuries or even finance, that affected the difference in the way Alice and I felt about spending money. I had been brought up in Kansas City by a thrifty grocer who was so wary of debt that, as far as I can tell, the house that my sister and I grew up in was not built until he could pay for it in cash. He would have been appalled at the idea of people who couldn't even afford a cleaning woman living in a huge house that had to be rented most summers to pay the taxes. In the article about her parents, Alice said that my cautiousness about money (she was kind enough not to say my

SKETCHBOOK BY MARK ALAN STAMATY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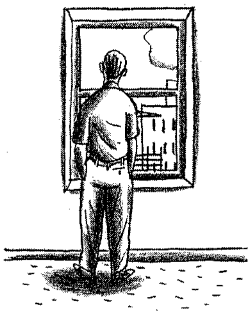
petit-bourgeois cautiousness about money) made her feel safe—made her feel that she was not at risk of losing her house again, or having to rent it out to strangers. Still, she saw no reason to live like a graduate student if you didn't have to.

Studies are always showing that most marital disagreements are about money, but a lot of those disagreements about money are, of course, really about something else. In Tokyo once, Alice and I had a disagreement that seemed to be about how much we ought to be spending for a hotel room. I was on a U.S.I.A. speaking tour of Japan, with a per-diem allowance—and not an amount that would have shocked the taxpayers. This was during a period when Japan was so expensive for people with dollars that one result of the trip was a column about how the main subject for discussion among Americans in Tokyo was how much a melon cost. I had inquired about the hotel recommended by the U.S.I.A. people for Tokyo, where we were to spend the first few days of the tour, and it sounded fine. When we arrived, after a long flight, our room turned out to be spartan. O.K., very spartan. Well, all right: very spartan and small. Quite small. I started to unpack. This was a mistake. I felt a chill in the air. It lasted through breakfast the next morning. Finally, Alice said something like "You're just intending to live in that room for the next four days? That would be all right with you?" Her view was that my willingness to stay in such a room without comment was a rebuke to her. I was implying that she was some sort of privileged and spoiled New Yorker—more or less the person she looked like. As I remember, I had enough sense not to say that it's difficult to criticize someone without opening your mouth. Instead, I reminded her that I was an insensitive lout who wasn't terribly aware of his surroundings; in other words, I copped to a lesser included offense. Then we moved to a nicer hotel.



We once had a disagreement about how much to pay someone who was replacing the floors in our bedroom and in my office, the room next door. The contractor, whose name was something like Herbie, was a rather coarse but cheerful man, as I remember him, and I liked his approach to pricing a job: he looked over the area in question and then gave the customer a fixed price, not an estimate, of what the job would cost. When our job was in its final stages, Herbie told me that it had turned out to be more difficult than he'd predicted, so he thought we should pay him more than the agreed price. I didn't think so. Alice did. I told Alice that Herbie was in the business of judging what a job would cost him and then giving customers a price that was low enough to attract business but high enough to give him a profit. If he guessed wrong now and then—and I wasn't even taking it for granted that he was telling the truth about guessing wrong this time—he'd presumably make up for it by guessing right most of the time. If Herbie found that the job required less time than he'd figured on, would he have suggested that we pay him less than the agreed price? In Alice's view, the point was that Herbie had, in fact, been required to spend more man-hours on the job than he'd estimated—she did assume he was telling the truth—so if we didn't pay him more we were being unfair, taking advantage of him. What he would do if the situation were reversed wasn't relevant to our behavior. I said the world didn't work that way. Her world did. I can't recall what we finally paid Herbie, but, now that I try to reconstruct the issues, it occurs to me that if we had retained some Talmudic scholars to mediate they would have decided that Alice was right.

In the discussion about Herbie's pay, she didn't resort to her final argument in such situations: "He doesn't have a very nice life." If I pointed out that some repairman's bill was obviously inflated, for instance, or if I said that I would never again enter a store whose proprietor had in some way broken any clause of my father's unspoken but deeply etched Shopkeeper's Code of Conduct, she would often say, "He doesn't have a very nice life." Sometimes she would add, "And we're so lucky." I don't think the Talmudists would go for that as a way of deciding disputes. ("A farmer went to Rabbi Eliezer to complain that a merchant had sold him two milk cows that, as it turned out, did not give milk, and, after listening to the farmer, Rabbi Eliezer said of the merchant, 'But he doesn't have a very nice life.'") On the other hand, she was right about one thing: we were so lucky.

VII

> By now, my wife's policy on attending school plays (a policy that also covers pageants, talent shows, revues, recitals, and spring assemblies) is pretty well known: she believes that if your child is in a school play and you don't go to every performance, including the special Thursday matinée for the fourth grade, the county will come and take the child.
>
> —*Shouts & Murmurs, The New Yorker.*

There was no doubt about her priorities. Concerning children's constitutional right to sit down to dinner with their parents every night, Alice tended toward strict constructionism. While our girls were growing up, she hated being separated from them; after a two-week trip to Asia, when they were about ten and thirteen, she decided that one week was her limit. When it came to trying to decide which theories of child-rearing were highly beneficial and which were absolutely ruinous to the future of your child—a subject of considerable discussion among some parents we knew—we agreed on a simple notion: your children are either the center of your life or they're not, and the rest is commentary.

After both girls were out of college, there was a period when Abigail was living in San Francisco while Sarah was in Los Angeles. Alice said that if they remained where they were we would simply have to live in California for part of the year. By then, though, her desire to be near them was no longer based partly on her need to influence what kind of people they would become. In her *New Yorker* article about the recurrence scare in 1990, she wrote:

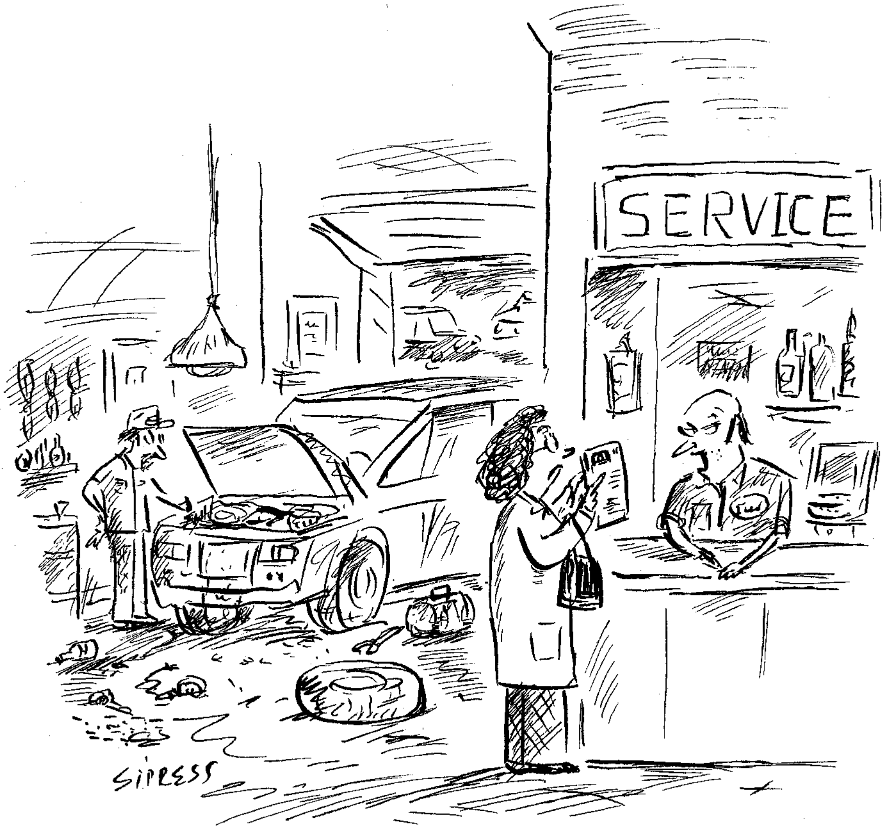
> In the days after that bone scan, I couldn't find a hopeful way out. . . . I did manage to imagine uplifting conversations I might have with my daughters about how it was O.K. for me to die this time, as it absolutely had not been when they were four and seven, and I

> had foreseen their adoring but occasionally absent-minded father getting them the wrong kind of sneakers or losing track of their dental appointments after I was gone. Now I was sure that I had told them everything of importance I knew; they had understood it all and figured out a lot on their own, and were as close to perfect as they could possibly be. Then it occurred to me that neither of them was married yet, and I would hate to miss the weddings and the grandchildren. I speculated about which of my friends I would assign to help them pick out their wedding dresses. Then I cried and decided that I really wanted to stay around.

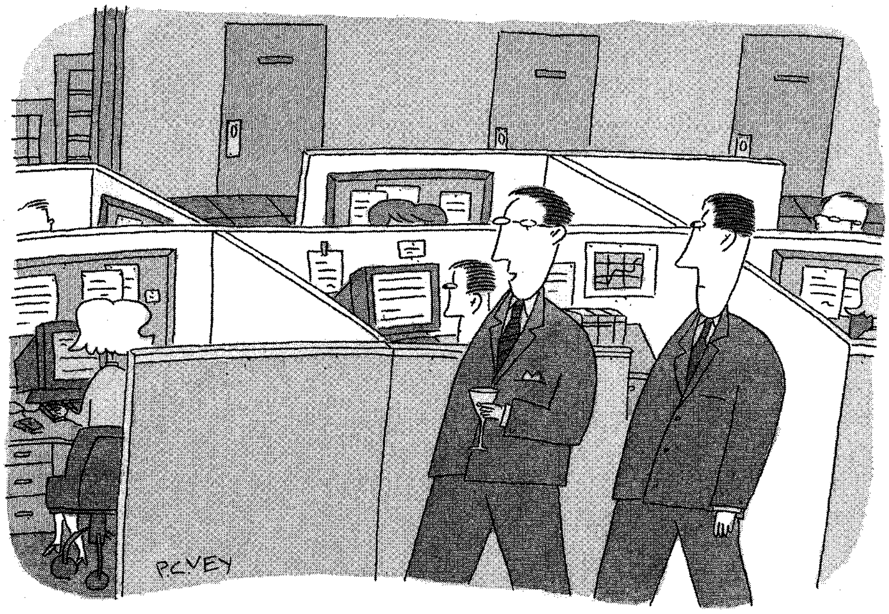
My problem in 1976 would have been much more serious than sneakers and dental appointments, I realized, when I finally allowed myself to dwell on what would have happened if Alice hadn't survived. The real problem would have been that I couldn't imagine trusting anyone else to be involved in raising our girls. I not only thought they needed to know everything of importance that Alice knew; I also thought, I suppose, that she was the only person who knew it. When I'm asked how both of our daughters came to be involved in the sort of work they do—Abigail is a legal-services attorney for children, Sarah is a clinical social worker—I, naturally, deny having anything to do with it. "I want to assure you that I tried to instill in them the value of selfishness and even rapaciousness," I say. "When Abigail came down to breakfast during her years in high school, I would tell her the temperature and the starting salary for an associate at Cravath, Swaine & Moore." But they had Alice there as a model. Because she survived, they were exposed every day to someone who (as a friend wrote after Alice died) managed to "navigate the tricky waters between living a life you could be proud of and still delighting in the many things there are to take pleasure in." Sneakers and dental appointments are the kind of things you can figure out, or find someone to figure out. Exemplars are hard to come by.

I don't mean that Alice and the girls were always in perfect harmony. Sarah, in describing the complicated relationship that she, in particular, had with her mother, said at Alice's memorial service that at the center of it was the fact that "we both wanted desperately love, approval, and admiration from each other." That meant that it was easy for them to wound each other even with an offhand comment. At times, Sarah said, Alice had told her that their conversations had made her feel like "a nerd around the too cool cheerleader." At times, Sarah would feel that Alice expected her and Abigail to sail through perfect lives. Addressing that in one of her letters to the girls, Alice said that, perhaps because of a too flippant family motto—"Pull Up Your Socks," which was sometimes expressed as "No Kvetching"—we hadn't made clear how difficult we knew it could be to get through the imperfect patches that occur in everyone's life. "As you get older," she wrote, "you will begin to understand that we love you not because you are perfect, but because you are decent and loving and honest and will always deal with what life brings you with courage."

Alice always said that parents had a huge influence on children when it came to what she called "the big things." Essentially, she meant values. In a letter to the girls, she once included among the messages we'd been trying to send them "to worry about being kind and generous to other people, to be honest with yourself and with others, to find meaning in the work you do, not to over-value financial success." Although we never discussed it in these terms, I think she believed in the transformative power of pure, undiluted love. Once, for the program at the Hole in the Wall Gang Camp gala, some volunteer counsellors contributed short passages about their experiences at camp, and Alice wrote about one of the campers, a sunny little girl she called L. At camp, Alice had a tendency to gravitate toward the child who needed the most help, and L. was one of those. "Last summer, the camper I got closest to, L., was a magical child who was severely disabled," Alice wrote. "She had two genetic diseases, one which kept her from growing and one which kept her from digesting any food. She had to be fed through a tube at night and she had so much difficulty walking that I drove her around in a golf cart a lot. We both liked that. One day, when we were playing duck-duck-goose, I was sitting behind her and she asked me to hold her mail for her while she took her turn to be chased around the circle. It took her a while to make the circuit, and I had time to see that on top of the pile was a note from her mom. Then I did something



"I can't get into specifics about your bill—that's operational."



"Ever since I gave up coffee I feel a lot less jittery."

• •

truly awful, which I'm reluctant now to reveal. I decided to read the note. I simply had to know what this child's parents could have done to make her so spectacular, to make her the most optimistic, most enthusiastic, most hopeful human being I had ever encountered. I snuck a quick look at the note, and my eyes fell on this sentence: 'If God had given us all of the children in the world to choose from, L., we would only have chosen you.' Before L. got back to her place in the circle, I showed the note to Bud, who was sitting next to me. 'Quick. Read this,' I whispered. 'It's the secret of life.'"

VIII

The summer after her operation, I was finishing the second of what turned out to be three books about eating. The work I did on the final drafts of the book was dominated by additional references to Alice. The title I eventually settled on for the book was "Alice, Let's Eat." Spreading Alice from beginning to end in her usual George Burns role was a way of declaring, mainly to myself, that we were not accepting the prognosis that would have made her a tragic character.

—*"Family Man."*

I was never able to remember more than smatterings of what the surgeon said just after Alice's operation in June of 1976. He told me the tumor had been malignant but that he'd taken it out, along with a lobe of Alice's lung. I don't remember whether he mentioned then that there'd been some lymph-node involvement; I'm not sure I would have known what that meant anyway. After he had summed up the operation in a couple of sentences, I asked him about Alice's prognosis, and he said something about "ten-per-cent chance." I didn't quite understand what he was talking about. I thought I'd missed something. I asked, "Ten-per-cent chance of what?" And he said, "Ten-per-cent chance that she'll survive."

For some years, that conversation with the surgeon was unsafe territory for me if I intended to keep my composure. I couldn't talk about it, and I tried not to think about it. But it was the shock of it that I was trying to avoid, I think, not the content: for reasons I can't completely explain, I truly never believed that Alice would, like an overwhelming percentage of the people in her situation, die within a year or two of being diagnosed. Although she warned in the *New England Journal of Medicine* article that every talisman has its limitations, I suppose I fell for the talisman of will. I thought I could protect her. I somehow thought I could keep her alive because I wouldn't accept the possibility that she was going to die. I don't think Alice accepted that possibility, either. She later wrote, "I am known among my friends and family as an incorrigible, even ridiculous optimist," although she also wrote, "I was afraid that all the brave things I said might no longer hold if I got sick again." A couple of days after she'd learned the prognosis, I came into her room to find her on the phone, making notes. It had become obvious that the course of radiation would mean that we couldn't go to Nova Scotia, and she was trying to find a day camp where the girls could go while we made our trips to the radiologist.

A couple of years after Alice's diagnosis, I realized that I wasn't thinking about it all the time. Sooner or later, we found ourselves back in our regular lives. We attended our first family graduation ceremonies, at P.S. 3. Alice had become more involved in educational television. A company she and a partner founded eventually produced a PBS series that described various aspects of the visual and performing arts to children by building each program around an artist at work—David Hockney painting a picture for a program on perspective, for instance, and Max Roach working out drum riffs for a program on rhythm. I was again going on the road every three weeks for a series of articles I was doing. After finishing the reporting for one of those pieces, I was walking through an airport to catch a plane to New York when, apropos of nothing, the possibility that things could have gone the other way in 1976 burst into my mind. I could see myself trying to tell my girls that their mother was dead. I think I literally staggered. I sat down in the nearest chair. I wasn't in tears. I was in a condition my father would have called pole-axed. A couple of people stopped to ask if I was all right. I must have said yes. After a while, the pictures faded from my mind. I walked to the gate and caught my flight to New York. Alice was there. The girls were there. Everything was all right.

In the letter Alice sent in 1979 to Bruno Navasky—the book, "Dear Bruno," was published many years later, in 1995—she mentioned a question about her illness that she'd been stunned by after she gave a speech to some medical students. If she knew she'd recover and have a normal life span, one student asked, would she have chosen to go through the experience. "I won't try to convince you that there will ever be anything about having cancer that you like," she wrote Bruno, "but someday, when you are better, we should talk about it. The one thing I know is that you and I will know some things that other people don't know, and we will have a lot to talk about." I don't think Alice and Bruno had that specific conversation, but they had plenty of opportunity. "Dear Bruno" included a reply from Bruno to the letter Alice had sent him sixteen years before. It began, "Thanks for your letter. I really should have answered sooner, but I've been so busy. After you wrote to me, I made a list of everything I wanted to do when I left the hospital, and then suddenly I was doing it. There was high school to finish, then college. For a few years, I was living in Japan."

Alice loved Bruno's letter. For her, of course, the measure of how you held up in the face of a life-threatening illness was not how much you changed but how much you stayed the same, in control of your own identity. At least until the 1990 recurrence scare, we had gradually unclenched our fists and tried to think of Alice's illness as something in the past. Of course, we never completely lost sight of the dragons mentioned in her *New England Journal of Medicine* piece. In the blood-count line at Memorial, she wrote, cancer survivors sometimes feel like knights who have slain their dragons, but "we all know that the dragons are never quite dead and might at any time be aroused, ready for another fight."

When Alice's dragon came, it approached from a direction we hadn't even been guarding. In the spring of 2001, ten months after Sarah's wedding and a month or so before Abigail was to be married in New York, a routine X-ray prompted a doctor to recommend that Alice have an angiogram. The angiogram made it obvious that she had to have a bypass operation immediately—that day. As they wheeled her away, she was smiling. She said they were going to fix her heart. I had never before seen anybody enthusiastic about emergency open-heart surgery.

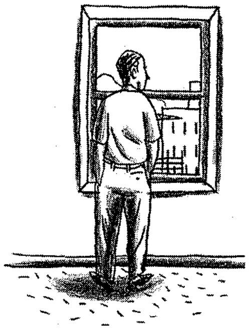
Part of that, I told friends at the time, was Alice's singular world view. Part of it, I suspect, was the assumption that what we were in for would be similar to what we'd experienced four years before, when I'd had a bypass operation done by the same surgeon. Although the recovery had sometimes made me recall one of my father's favorite Midwestern sayings—"I haven't had so much fun since the hogs ate little sister"—it was, in fact, a pretty straightforward procedure. There was a steady, if slow, recuperation, and then one day I realized that I was fully recovered, grateful for the intervention.

But Alice's operation took much longer than expected. The surgeon said the radiation had made her arteries difficult to work with, and had caused some damage to her heart. I later learned that one of the young surgical residents was so concerned that he dozed in a chair next to her bed throughout that first night—the equivalent, I surmised with gratitude, of those traffic policemen who had given her warnings instead of a summons. After a week or ten days, she came home, but several days later she was readmitted to the hospital. By then, it was only about a week until Abigail's wedding. One morning, she said that we had to talk about that. She said that the wedding had to go on no matter what and that it couldn't be about her. She said it had to be the same wedding we had planned—the ceremony in the marble lobby of the Surrogate's Court building, the dim-sum parlor reception in Chinatown which Abigail had always wanted, the same speeches and dancing. "No matter what," she repeated.

"We don't have to talk about this," I said. "We're going to have the wedding and you're going to march down the aisle with Abigail and me."

"You have to promise now," she said.

I managed to nod.



She got out of the hospital about six hours before the wedding. She did march down the aisle, and she was able to stay late enough at the reception to witness a twenty-minute or so rendition of the hora that left the Chinese waiters staring in amazement. The next day, she sent an e-mail to the group of people I'd been keeping informed of her condition. Most of the first paragraph was in caps: "ABIGAIL GOT MARRIED YESTERDAY AND I WAS THERE. I WAS THERE FOR THE WHOLE THING, GOT TO SAY MY TOAST (QUITE MOVING) AND EAT CHOCOLATE CAKE AND WATCH BUD'S 87-YEAR-OLD UNCLE JERRY (WHO MARRIED SARAH AND ALEX IN MALIBU LAST JUNE) DANCE HIS ASS OFF WITH ALICE WATERS, WHO HAD BROUGHT ME ROSES FROM HER GARDEN IN BERKELEY." Toward the end of the e-mail, she said she was safe at home, in the Village, eating comfort food and about to watch "The Sopranos" and an A. R. Gurney play on television. She closed by saying, "Life doesn't get much better than this."

Four months later, speaking at Alice's memorial service, Sarah said she thought that Alice had toughed it out until she was sure her girls had married the sort of husbands she considered good for the long haul. "I know my mom's main goal in life was to protect my sister, my father, and me," Sarah said. "She wanted to protect us from worry, from sadness, from loneliness—things her parents had not been able to protect her from." She ended by saying, "Mom, I know you're listening somewhere, waiting patiently to hear me say these words: You were the coolest girl I ever knew."

A week and a half before, Alice had died of cardiac arrest. For a while, she had seemed to be recuperating—we were able to spend the summer in Nova Scotia this time—but in late August she began to feel weaker. She died while waiting in the heart-failure unit of Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital to see if she would be eligible for a heart transplant. The doctors said that her heart had been destroyed by radiation. In other words, you could say that she died of the treatment rather than the disease. Presumably, though, it was also the treatment that, against horrifying odds, gave her twenty-five years of life. I know what Alice, the incorrigible and ridiculous optimist, would have said about a deal that allowed her to see her girls grow up: "Twenty-five years! I'm so lucky!" I try to think of it in those terms, too. Some days I can and some days I can't. ♦

LETTER FROM LIBERIA

AFTER THE WARLORDS

Can Ellen Johnson Sirleaf remake her nation?

BY JON LEE ANDERSON

One afternoon last month, I drove from downtown Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, to Paynesville, a suburb to the east, to attend the thirty-sixth-birthday celebration of the new speaker of the house, Edwin Snowe. The guest of honor was Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the newly inaugurated President of Liberia and the first democratically elected female head of state in Africa. As speaker, Snowe will be the third most powerful person in the government, behind Johnson Sirleaf and her Vice-President. Snowe was also, as it happened, a prominent member of the regime of Johnson Sirleaf's predecessor, Charles Taylor, a former warlord who came to power at the head of an army of drug-addled child soldiers. Taylor's troops, who wore fright wigs and masks, carried out gruesome killings—they eviscerated pregnant women, cut out their opponents' hearts, and set up roadblocks where they shot people at random. Snowe is Taylor's former son-in-law and is widely considered to have been his bagman; in government service, he became very rich. The United Nations has imposed a travel ban on Snowe because of his ties to Taylor.

I knew the way to Paynesville well. During my eighth-grade school year, in the early seventies, I lived there with my uncle Warren Coonrad, who worked in Liberia for the United States Geological Survey. But, after years of civil war, only the outlines of the landscape were the same. My uncle's house, which had sat on a grassy plain near the old police academy, had vanished from sight under a sprawl of shanties. The police academy is now home to a Jordanian police unit attached to a contingent of fifteen thousand U.N. troops who have kept the peace since a ceasefire in 2003. As my driver passed a roadside market, I saw a man holding up a crocodile with a fresh bullet hole between its eyes. Turning off the main road, we were stopped by a couple of young men with shovels, who had been patching the road with dirt. They approached the car and demanded, "You help the project!" I told my driver to give them some money, and we were allowed to pass.

The birthday party was being held in Paynesville's town hall, a long, dilapidated tin-roofed building. A crowd had gathered under the mango trees out front, and venders had set up stalls. A few minutes after I arrived, sirens sounded and policemen on motorcycles appeared, followed by two black Suburbans and Johnson Sirleaf's black Mercedes. As she got out of the car, wearing a blue-green-and-gold robe, her bodyguards, including Americans provided by the U.S. State Department, surrounded her.

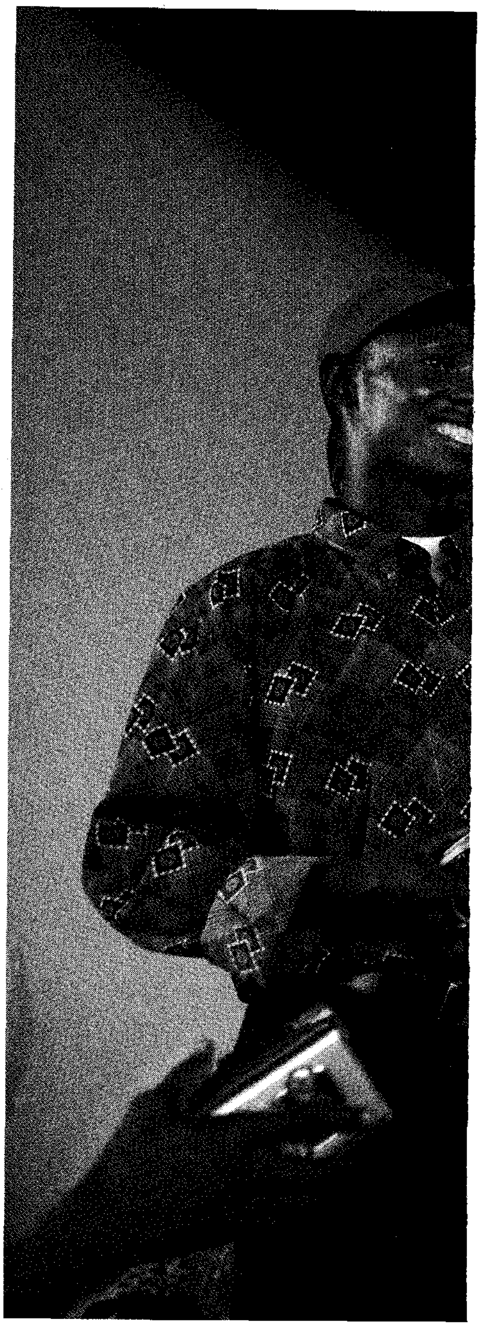
Inside, Johnson Sirleaf was seated on a stage next to Snowe, a round-faced man in white pants and a long white shirt, and his current wife, who also wore white. There were ice buckets on the table in front of them, stocked with Laurent-Perrier champagne and Volvic. Hundreds of guests sat at plastic tables, and women in white aprons printed with the words "Snowe is in the House" stood behind a banquet table.

A brass band struck up the national anthem, and then a provocatively dressed young woman with dyed red hair sang a Marilyn Monroe-like rendition of "Happy Birthday, Mr. Speaker." Snowe himself then sang a reggae song, "Blessin' You." A champagne toast followed. Snowe turned to Johnson Sirleaf, calling her "my mother, my sister." He said that he didn't intend to "get into the ring" with her, "because it's about moving forward."

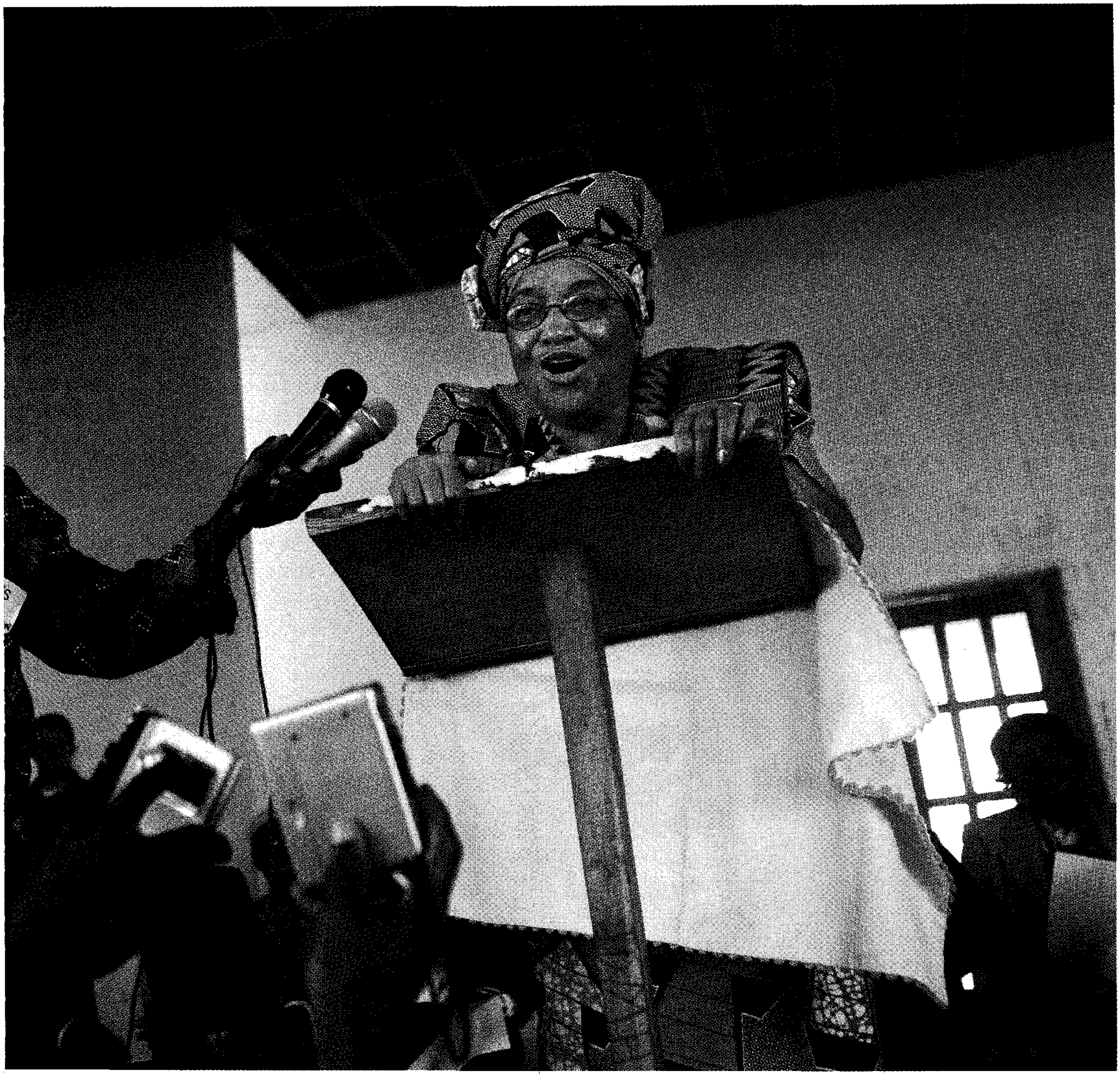
The mayor of Paynesville took the microphone, got on his knees before Johnson Sirleaf, and cried out, "I ask you to be our mother and to lead us to reconciliation. God bless you, we love you!"

Johnson Sirleaf rose and spoke; each time she made a point, the band's percussionist did a drumroll, in the style of the Johnny Carson show. "You voted for Snowe as the speaker, but you voted for me as the President"—she paused theatrically, as the guests laughed and applauded—"and for that we must all thank God."

Afterward, as her motorcade sped off, a traditional costumed bush devil on stilts danced amid the crowd outside, lunging at young children, who ran away shrieking. The bush devil wore a red mask beaded with cowrie shells, a purple tunic, and a raffia skirt. His mask was attached to a cap made out of what looked like monkey fur, from which



Johnson Sirleaf last month in Nimba County.



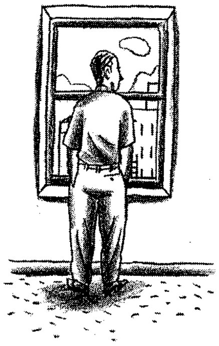
erican diplomat says, "People are waiting for change out there, and they're also waiting to pounce." Photograph by Tim Hetherington.

hung a cloth mantle. The cloak, I realized, was stamped with images of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's smiling face.

Snowe's presence in Liberia's legislature, along with that of several former warlords, is one of the more uncomfortable political realities facing Johnson Sirleaf. The senior senator from Nimba County, for example, is Prince Johnson, who, on the night of September 9, 1990, tortured to death Samuel Doe, who was then the President. In a moment that was recorded on videotape (bootlegged copies of which are available from Monrovia's street venders, along with American action movies and Nigerian porn), Johnson ordered his men to cut off Doe's ears, and then forced Doe to eat one of them. It is rumored that Johnson ate the other. (The junior senator from Nimba is Adolphus Dolo, who styled himself General Peanut Butter, and whose troops ransacked Monrovia.) Neither Prince Johnson nor any of his colleagues have been prosecuted for war crimes.

Johnson Sirleaf, a Harvard-educated economist who was twice imprisoned by Doe, won the Presidency in November, after a runoff election against George Weah, a former international soccer star. Her inauguration, on January 16th, was a gala affair: Laura Bush and Condoleezza Rice attended. In her inauguration speech, Johnson Sirleaf spoke about reconciliation, creating jobs, and tackling corruption. But she said that one of her main goals for her first six months in office was simply to restore "some measure" of electricity to the capital, which has had no power since 1990.

Monrovia was the scene of heavy fighting and looting during the war, and is a ruined city of shacks and slums. There is no running water, no sewer system, no garbage collection. Only a few rich Liberians and expatriates have generators; after sunset Monrovia is dark. One night, I drove by a gas station that had rigged up power for some lights and a stereo; hundreds of youths had gathered to dance to Liberian hip-hop in the oasis of light. Downtown, the Dukor Palace Hotel, where I used to go swimming, is a kind of city in itself. A couple of thousand displaced people have built shanties inside its hulking, burned-out nine-story shell. All that remains of its nineteen-sixties modernism is a Jetsons-style canopied entrance. A shanty occupies a corner of the lobby, which has been stripped to the bare concrete. On the sill of a panoramic window, laundry had been hung to dry. Leaving the Dukor, I stepped over streams of urine and other liquids that ran out of the base of the hotel, like secretions from a beached whale.



The average life expectancy in Liberia is forty-seven; one in every sixteen adults is H.I.V.-positive or has AIDS, and one in every seven babies dies in infancy. Malaria, hepatitis, typhoid, and yellow fever are endemic. The war killed more than two hundred thousand people and made refugees of half the population. Eighty-five per cent of Liberians are unemployed, including up to a hundred thousand former fighters—an attractive recruitment pool for anyone who wants to start a new war. Outside the capital, renegade bands of armed men and boys continue to roam.

"There isn't a place which isn't a challenge for Ellen. This is a failed state; every aspect of the country is a shambles," Alfreda Meyers, the political counsellor at the U.S. Embassy, said. "Because of what's happened here in the past twenty years, the instinct of survival has robbed an otherwise competent people of a moral compass." She added, "Her honeymoon is very short. The frustration levels are huge—people are waiting for change out there, and they're also waiting to pounce."

When I lived in Liberia, it was a poor country, but as Africa's first republic—founded in 1847 by freed slaves who emigrated from the United States with the help of the American Colonization Society—it had escaped the post-colonial upheavals of many other African countries. With income from its iron ore, rubber, diamonds, and ship registry, Liberia had a basic infrastructure, and, by and large, things worked.

Liberia was staunchly pro-Western and received regular financial assistance from the United States—more than any other country in Africa. The largest private employer was Firestone Tire and Rubber (now Bridgestone/Firestone). American missionaries ran Cuttington College, the oldest four-year college in sub-Saharan Africa, founded in 1889. The Voice of America operated a relay station for its Africa-wide broadcasts, and, although I didn't know it then, the C.I.A. ran a communications facility there.

Liberia's President was William Vacanarat Shadrach Tubman, who wore homburgs and smoked cigars and had ruled since 1944 in a style described by Western observers at the time as a benevolent dictatorship. Liberian society was highly stratified; the children of missionaries went to mission schools, and the children of Firestone employees went to company-run schools. I attended the American Cooperative School, with the children of foreign diplomats, Lebanese merchants—who run most of the trade in the country—and the ruling Americo-Liberian élite.

Americo-Liberians, who were also known as "settlers" or "Congos," were the descendants of freed slaves, and had controlled Liberia since its founding, at the expense of its indigenous majority. They were Freemasons and Protestants, their English diction reminiscent of the American South, and were generally lighter-skinned, wealthier, and better educated than indigenous Liberians, most of whom lived in the forested interior of the country. These people belonged to sixteen different tribes, spoke distinct dialects, and, except for a Muslim and Christian minority, were animists who adhered to secret tribal societies. Most Americo-Liberians had little to do with the bush, leaving it to missionaries.

Liberia's lingua franca was pidgin, a rapid-fire patois that is melodic and exclamatory and salted with archaic Anglicisms. To be angry, in pidgin, is to be "vexed," to be bad is to be "wicked"; criminals are "rogues," and the word "fine" is extended, sung out as "fine-oooh." One pidgin phrase I enjoyed repeating was "Maaanh, naa wuumannh, she fine-oooh!" meaning "Man, that woman is pretty!" At A.C.S., outside class, we all spoke pidgin to one another.

Early in Tubman's Presidency, he initiated a "unification policy," designed to extend his control over the country by coöpting the tribal chiefs with patronage jobs and money. By the sixties, Tubman was not only the Grand Master of Liberia's Masonic Order but also the Supreme Zo of the Poro secret society. He was regarded by many Liberians as having magical powers, and was rumored to engage in ritual human sacrifice. It became fashionable among certain Americo-Liberians to adopt tribal names, wear native clothing, and send their adolescent sons to "bush schools" to undergo the initiation rites of manhood.

Still, Americo-Liberians remained in the political ascendancy. My best friend at A.C.S. was Winston Tolbert, whose father, Stephen, was Liberia's preëminent tycoon, as well as its finance minister, and whose uncle William was the Vice-President. Our most memorable school excursion was a catered lunch on Stephen Tolbert's immense private yacht, anchored in Monrovia's harbor.

The Old Man, as Tubman was called, attended our school's graduation ceremony in 1971. He moved silently along the line of students, as if bestowing his grace on us. I shook his hand, and was delighted when he clicked my fingers, in the Liberian fashion, making a snapping sound. A few weeks later, Tubman, who was in his seventies, died, and Winston's uncle William Tolbert assumed the Presidency. Pat Nixon attended his inauguration.

My old school is now a rehabilitation center for former child soldiers, and Tubman's Presidential residence, a white neoclassical mansion at the center of town, is a ruin. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf lives in a large two-story concrete house painted cream and red, which she had rebuilt after it was destroyed in the war. There is a noisy generator out back, and, like all the homes of wealthy or powerful people in Monrovia, it is surrounded by a high wall topped with razor wire. American and Liberian security men patrol the premises, along with a small detachment of Nigerian U.N. troops, whose tents are pitched in the President's garden.

Johnson Sirleaf received me at her home one evening soon after her inauguration. She had been working late, and wore slippers and a long embroidered gown, rather like a housecoat. She is a short, bespectacled woman, with a watchful gaze. She showed me into her small downstairs office, which had pale carpeting, blue curtains, and a framed picture of her with Hillary Clinton. A curved wooden desk was piled high with papers. Johnson Sirleaf had wanted the Presidency of Liberia for a long time, and, whatever else she brings to the job, she has shown a great deal of tenacity merely by surviving long enough to achieve her goal.

Johnson Sirleaf was raised in Monrovia but spent her holidays and summers in a village in the interior, Julejuah, where her father, Jahmale Carney Johnson, the son of a prominent member of the Gola tribe, kept a home. Her mother, Martha Dunbar, was the daughter of a German trader and a Liberian market woman. As children, both of her parents were sent to Monrovia to be the wards of better-off Americo-Liberian families, who raised and educated them—a common custom in Liberia. Johnson Sirleaf's father obtained a law degree, and became the first "native" Liberian elected to the national legislature; it is an achievement that Johnson Sirleaf is especially proud of. He and his wife had two sons and two daughters; Ellen, their third child, was born in 1938.

Ellen Johnson attended the College of West Africa, one of Monrovia's better secondary schools. In 1955, her senior year, Tubman escaped an assassination attempt, and afterward carried out a wave of political repression. One day, soldiers broke up a demonstration near her school and chased the protesters into the yard. "It was the first time I had seen active violence," she said.

When she was seventeen, she fell in love with James Sirleaf, an agricultural economist. She married him right out of high school, and they had four sons. In 1962, her husband was accepted as a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin. Johnson Sirleaf was twenty-four and had never been outside Liberia—"and so the first place I went was Madison, Wisconsin," she said. The children stayed behind with their grandparents. While her husband studied for his master's, Johnson Sirleaf got an accounting degree at the Madison College of Business, and worked at the lunch counter of the Rennebohm Drug Store.

They returned to Liberia in the mid-sixties, and she got a job in Tubman's planning ministry. "We all thought, Now there are opportunities, now we know better, we've travelled, we've gone to school abroad, we know the potential," she said. "But as more and more people became educated, particularly on the indigenous side, the society became radicalized. The liberalism and progressivism of well-educated indigenous went from wanting to break the monopoly of power and privilege of the oligarchy to seeing it as a thing that was there to be destroyed—the focus went from development to 'get the system.' "

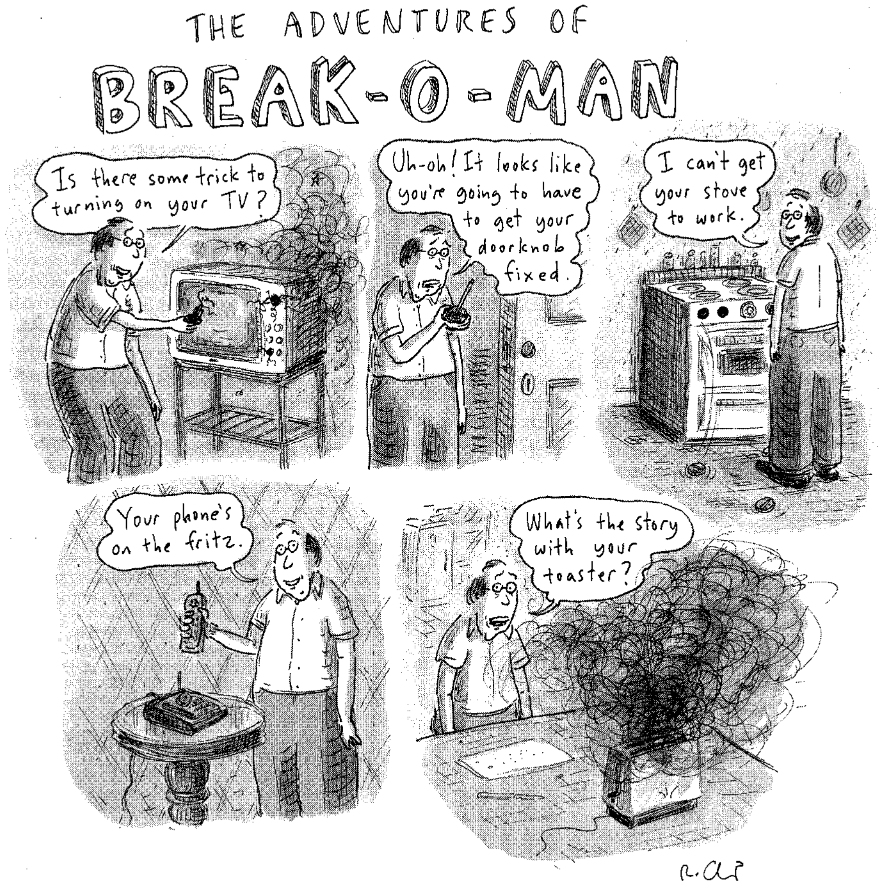
On a number of occasions, I had noticed that Johnson Sirleaf was one of the lightest-skinned people in the room. It struck me that she had spent her entire life looking like an Americo-Liberian without actually being one, an inheritance from her German grandfather which had left her in an uneasy limbo during Liberia's political upheavals.

"I cross both worlds, you know," she said. "People always thought I was Americo-Liberian, until today—it's a political hurdle. If I had not had such a history of political activism, I would never have become President."

In 1969, Johnson Sirleaf took part in an international development conference in Liberia. When it was her turn to speak, she referred to Tubman's government, which had become increasingly corrupt, as a "kleptocracy." Afterward, Gustav Papanek, a Harvard economist, called her over. "He said, 'You're a young woman and you're going to get in trouble, you're going to go to jail, and so I'm going to try and get you out of here,' " Johnson Sirleaf said. "So he got me a scholarship to go to Harvard."

Johnson Sirleaf first went to the University of Colorado in Boulder, to take courses in economics. By then, she and her husband had divorced. She enrolled at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, and received her master's in public administration in 1971, the year that Tubman died. When she returned home, she joined the government of William Tolbert, Winston's uncle, eventually becoming his Minister of Finance.

On the night of April 12, 1980, Samuel Doe, a twenty-eight-year-old master


THE ADVENTURES OF
BREAK-O-MAN
Is there some trick to turning on your TV?
Uh-oh! It looks like you're going to have to get your doorknob fixed.
I can't get your stove to work.
Your phone's on the fritz.
What's the story with your toaster?

sergeant, entered the Presidential residence with seventeen other soldiers and bayonetted Tolbert to death in his bed. Doe then invited the international press to witness the executions of thirteen of Tolbert's senior officials. They were machine-gunned on a beach. The rise of Doe, an ethnic Krahn, one of Liberia's least assimilated tribes, put an end to a hundred and thirty-three years of Americo-Liberian domination.

Johnson Sirleaf went into exile in Nairobi, where she became a vice-president at Citibank. But when Doe called an election, in 1985, she returned to join the opposition. After a campaign in which Doe imprisoned several of his critics—including, briefly, Johnson Sirleaf—he claimed just over fifty per cent of the vote. The results did nothing to stabilize the country. Doe's soldiers carried out massacres in Nimba County, which was the center of a revolt, and a wave of political killings in Monrovia. Johnson Sirleaf was arrested again, and held for eight months, until pressure from the international community secured her release.

Johnson Sirleaf moved to Washington, D.C., and was hired as a vice-president at HSBC Equator Bank. She stayed involved in Liberia's exile politics, which consisted chiefly of hatching plots to depose Doe. In the late eighties, she threw her support behind Charles Taylor, who had fled to America. Taylor was arrested by U.S. authorities on charges that he had embezzled money from Doe's government, but escaped from a Boston jail before he could be extradited. (The Reagan Administration mostly ignored Doe's abuses, primarily because he had embraced anti-Communism.) Taylor organized a guerrilla force, with Muammar Qaddafi's support, and invaded Liberia on Christmas Eve, 1989, seizing territory in the north. In May, 1990, Johnson Sirleaf travelled clandestinely to Liberia to meet with Taylor at his field headquarters.

Prince Johnson had joined Taylor, but soon broke away, and entered Monrovia with his own men. His killing of Samuel Doe gave him a brief hold over the city, before he fled in the face of Taylor's army. The war that followed was characterized by horrific atrocities on all sides; Taylor was not the only one to use children as soldiers. In 1997, Jimmy Carter and other mediators persuaded Taylor to hold elections, and in the ensuing lull Johnson Sirleaf returned, leaving her latest job, as head of the U.N. Development Programme for Africa. She ran against Taylor for President. He won seventy-five per cent of the vote to her ten per cent; many Liberians said they had voted for him because they feared that if they didn't, he would continue fighting forever.

Johnson Sirleaf stayed in Monrovia, running an N.G.O. for development projects out of a tiny office. One morning in June, 1998, I met her there. I was writing about Charles Taylor, who had told me, "Ellen Johnson was involved with me from the very beginning." When I asked her about that, she became defensive. She said that she had distanced herself from him early in the war, after he killed two of her friends. But, I asked, wasn't Taylor's nature apparent before that?

She replied that on her trip to Taylor's base she had "addressed the tribalistic killings" with him. "When the killing started, I was in contact with the State Department. They suggested that we suggest to Taylor that that was not the way to go. But he didn't listen." She looked unhappy with her own explanation.

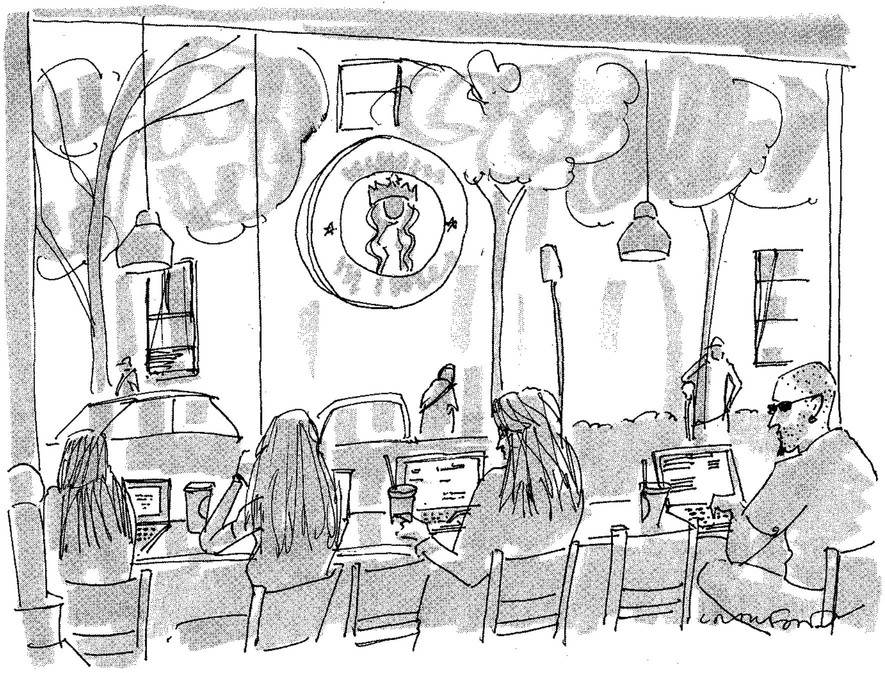
"I must confess, this is my first encounter with identity theft within a marriage."

Soon after my visit, the war resumed. Rebels from northern tribes gained ground and, in 2003, laid siege to Monrovia. The fighting ended only after an internationally brokered ceasefire provided for the arrival of U.N. troops and the appointment of a transitional government, whose members were drawn from the various factions. Taylor went into exile. His last words to reporters, before boarding a flight for Nigeria, were "God willing, I will be back."

In one of the final acts of Liberia's transitional parliament, its members voted to keep their official vehicles, brand-new Grand Cherokees. Many then stripped their offices of everything that could be carried away, including the panelling, the carpeting, and the electrical outlets. Despite the end of the war, Liberian society is characterized by what Alfreda Meyers described as "rampant and systemic attitudes of corruption."

Johnson Sirleaf has had a reputation for financial probity throughout her career. However, she has been criticized for giving her stepson the job of director of Liberia's National Security Agency. She defended this as necessary for her safety. "I feel more secure with somebody who is close to me—that in itself is testament to the risk that I feel," she told me. "But he, too, will have to live by the rules and the standards." (One of her sons is a doctor in Connecticut; another works for Wachovia in North Carolina; and two are bankers in Liberia.) The greater ethical risk, as Johnson Sirleaf forms her government, may be the jobs and favors she gives to those who are implicated in the crimes of Liberia's recent past.

"I don't go around and say, 'This is a political compromise,'" Johnson Sirleaf



"Any of you pretty ladies just get my e-mail?"

told me. "But everybody knows, when I make a certain appointment, that it's not an appointment from my heart."

Donald Booth, the U.S. Ambassador to Liberia, told me that, for the moment, Johnson Sirleaf enjoys the good will of Liberia's international partners. An alphabet soup of agencies works on everything from retraining the police to digging wells. She has agreed to let foreign advisers approve the budget of each ministry, in order to fight corruption, and has promised to promote foreign investment. But, Booth said, "She has a relatively short period of time in which to prove herself. She needs to show things are going to change." He added, "The biggest danger is that youth will become disenchanted with things, not wait for new elections, and become malleable to the next warlord or Big Man who comes along."

The ceasefire agreement provided for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to look into war crimes. When Johnson Sirleaf speaks about the commission, she conspicuously avoids mentioning that it has the power to recommend criminal prosecutions—a fact that is not yet widely known in Liberia. When I talked to politicians with ties to Taylor, it was clear that they believed that the commission would instead amount to a kind of public exorcism, in which people would own up to what they had done and be pardoned.

I visited the Reverend Gerald Coleman, one of the commissioners, in his temporary headquarters, a plywood office perched, like a tree house, on the second floor of a burned-out, looted former government building. "The country is still awash in arms," Coleman said. "Once they realize that there is no impunity for crimes against humanity, they are going to wake up, and some of them are now elected in government, people responsible for the most atrocious crimes."

In 2003, the Special Court for Sierra Leone indicted Charles Taylor for his role in that country's war—he had backed rebel fighters who had a proclivity for amputation and rape—and an international warrant was issued for his arrest. President Olusegun Obasanjo, of Nigeria, said he would not extradite Taylor, who was living comfortably in a walled compound on the coast, to Sierra Leone. He would, however, send him to Liberia if he was asked to do so by a democratically elected government. In other words, the decision was Johnson Sirleaf's.

Before leaving power, Taylor looted Liberia, and he is still extremely wealthy. He has a major stake in one of Liberia's biggest cell-phone companies and is presumed to own a host of other businesses through front men. And there are rumors that he cut a deal with Johnson Sirleaf: she would not press for his extradition to Liberia, and his people would support her in the runoff against Weah. Before the election, Taylor's wife, Jewel Howard Taylor, returned to Liberia, claiming to have divorced him, and ran successfully for a Senate seat. She also campaigned for Johnson Sirleaf.

Johnson Sirleaf denied that she had made any such arrangement with Taylor. "There is no doubt in my mind that Mr. Taylor has to have his day in court," she told me. "And he has the right to self-defense. But the timing of it is the issue, because, don't forget, Mr. Taylor still has operatives in this country." (Last week, Johnson Sirleaf said she was consulting with Obasanjo about the options.)

As for Jewel Howard Taylor, she said, "In my view, she is trying to move from Mr. Taylor's shadow. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Taylor is trying to get a divorce so she can marry someone else." Johnson Sirleaf smiled significantly.

"I think Mrs. Taylor, honestly, will continue to advocate for her husband, or past husband, whatever he is to her, to remember whatever good things he did for her, but I think she is genuinely trying to find her own identity," Johnson Sirleaf said. "So far, in all the discussions I have had with her, she may say, 'Oh, I hope you give Charles a fair chance to be heard,' but never has she said that she thinks he ought to go free, because she knows it's not going to happen."

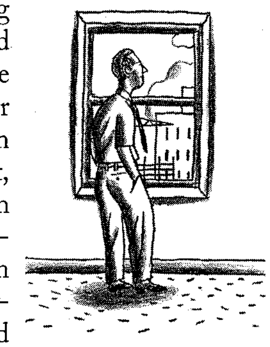
Senator Howard Taylor is a plump, coiffed woman in her early forties. Like Edwin Snowe, she is under a U.N. travel ban. When I visited her in her Senate office, she was wearing a brown suit, pumps, and pearls. Her office, in contrast to the plundered shells of most of her colleagues, was decorated with red wall-to-wall carpeting, a pair of gilt armchairs and a matching settee, and a picture of Jesus Christ. There was a large Bible on her desk and, next to her computer, "Robert's Rules for Dummies."

"My vocation is to serve," she told me. "I think I changed the way First Ladies behave in this country—no more tea parties!" She added, "I went into places of great peril to do humanitarian relief. I think it was this background that helped me win my seat."

I asked whether she thought Charles

Taylor would be extradited. "That's not something the President can decide by herself," she said. "I think the President needs time to make an economic and social agenda." She said she hoped that Johnson Sirleaf could "help put the past behind us."

"Charles Taylor is just one person, but he has a huge following here. He was a father to thousands of young people," she said. I presumed that she was referring to the corps of war orphans Taylor organized into a killing team called the Small Boys Unit, many of whom lived with him and operated as his Presidential security. They were often drunk or drugged, and everyone in Monrovia was terrified of them. "That kind of a relationship is not the kind of thing you just throw away and forget," she said.



Her separation from Taylor was "personal—definitely not political," she said. "When people talk about Charles Taylor the demon, I don't see him as that. Some people say he's crazy—I don't. I see him as a person who had quite a difficult job. I see him as someone who was human who made some mistakes."

She went on, "Charles Taylor was not a wicked leader, as some people put him out to be, because then I would be targeted, I would have been punished as a result of his being a dictator and a ruler that nobody wanted. And I am free to move around here."

The senatorial office of Prince Johnson, the man who killed Samuel Doe, is just down the hall from Jewel Howard Taylor's. It is a stark box of bare concrete with a small wooden desk and two simple chairs. Johnson is a large, fit man with a broad, dark face, and when I went to see him he was wearing a sober black suit. The room was hot, and the glass in the single window had been shattered. He had broken it himself, he said, to let in some air.

I asked Johnson how he felt about his reputation.

"I feel great," Johnson said. "My reputation is not bad. During the war, we fought, and in other wars people fought in this country. We created a safe haven for people in Liberia. In central Monrovia, we controlled banks, we controlled business, houses—we done great."

"I'm speaking about the killing of President Doe."

"Well, look. You've seen the clip. And you've seen what he did in Monrovia. You saw the first coup that took place in this country—it was bloody. And you didn't ask the people of Doe about that. When Doe was in, you didn't ask him, 'Why did you kill Tolbert?' " He listed other notorious incidents—the killing of refugees, of hospital patients. "He did all that. So when somebody wants to ask me what happened to him, I say we should forget about the past and build upon what we have to move toward the future!"

"Is your conscience clean on what happened that night?"

"My conscience?"

"Your conscience."

"Clean about what?"

"About the way . . . about torturing President Doe to death."

"I'll tell you what. Thousands of my citizens from Nimba County were slaughtered in cold blood, so what are you talking about? Why are you so specific about Doe? I have a videotape when he ordered the Army in Nimba and said, 'All Nimbanians leave Nimba, you prove to be innocent. Leave Nimba, or you'll never be seen again.' He destroyed my people. I came in defense."

"I think you've answered my question."

"Thank you!" Johnson laughed with relief.

I asked Johnson about Taylor. "Charles Taylor's issue extends beyond the border of Liberia. He broke international law—he attacked other countries," Johnson said. "Is America playing games? Are they not powerful enough, or impartial enough, to arrange his extradition straight to Sierra Leone, that they must have Ellen Johnson Sirleaf—all the problem is with Ellen! When I saw Ellen before the election, she was a little bit plump, but now she's getting reduced, because the problems are coming too plenty. So you want to give her more deep trouble with this Taylor business?"

Later on, he said, "When someone asks me, 'What about the war-crimes tribunal?' I say, 'It's not going to be a good thing.' Not that I feel guilty about something that I've done, that I'm afraid to appear—no! But if you start arresting a few people for war crimes the others who wouldn't want to be arrested will go to the bush. Don't forget that the arms may not have been totally given to the peacekeepers."

The beach where Doe executed Tolbert's ministers lies behind the Barclay Training Center, where Americans working for DynCorp are now recruiting and training a new Liberian Army. Just outside the center's walls, several hundred former soldiers of the old, disbanded Army live in a filthy cluster of wrecked barracks. I had heard that the jail where Johnson Sirleaf had been imprisoned was there, and so, one morning, I wandered into the slum.

I saw a few children, and women, doing chores. Most of the men were simply hanging out. Some appeared to be drunk, their eyes bloodshot. I asked about the jail, and a man offered to take me there. It was a long, roofless husk of a building, and as we approached it became apparent that it was the community toilet. We walked down a hallway with a row of cells, their doors long since looted. The man pointed to the first cell, a little larger than the rest, and told me that that was where Johnson Sirleaf had been held. Some children followed us in and, picking their way over the piles of shit, gathered quietly to stare at the President's old cell.

A tiny man with eyes that were a deep malarial yellow approached me on the way out. I could smell cane juice—Liberia's hard liquor—on his breath. He complained bitterly that he and his comrades were owed pensions. About eight men joined us, including a sharp-faced man who said his name was Captain George Dominic. He shouted that he had the loyalty of two thousand men, from every faction. "They're all here!" he told me, reeling off acronyms: "MODEL, ULIMO, LURD." If Johnson Sirleaf thought she could ignore their demands, he said, she was wrong.

A few days earlier, I had gone with Johnson Sirleaf to the Providence Baptist Church. She was dressed in a magnificent purple-and-cream dress, and was accompanied by Nohn Kidau—one of several women in her entourage—who wore a blue sequinned dress and a pair of sunglasses encrusted with bling.

After the services, a crowd of disabled veterans called to Johnson Sirleaf, asking for help. As bodyguards escorted the President to her car, Kidau hurried toward the men with a fistful of Liberian banknotes.

Johnson Sirleaf's new Labor Minister, Samuel Kofi Woods, is the closest thing to a radical in her administration. Woods, who is forty-two, worked to uncover human-rights abuses during Taylor's regime, and in 1998 he was forced to leave the country. His target now is Bridgestone/Firestone. Last year, in California, Woods and a consortium of labor groups filed a lawsuit against the corporation for "slave-like labor practices." (The company has filed a motion to dismiss, citing the lack of a valid claim.)

I accompanied Woods to the company's rubber plantation, and a group of workers showed me where they lived—long, low-slung blocks made of brick, with asbestos roofs. Each family had a single small, dark room. They had no electricity—though the managers, who lived nearby, did, along with a golf course—and just one bucket well, which they said they had dug themselves; an open trough of sewage ran past their doors. The men showed me where their children slept, on the floor. They are paid $3.38 per day.

Later, back in Monrovia, I told Johnson Sirleaf about my visit. She said, "It's inexcusable," and confessed that she had never seen the workers' housing. She had driven through the plantation but never stopped. "Maybe I should," she said.

I asked if she agreed with Woods's description of the conditions as a form of modern slavery.

"Kofi is a young human-rights activist," she said, smiling. "That could be the right description, but as a minister he should have used different words."

Johnson Sirleaf has pledged to review Bridgestone/Firestone's concession, however. "They are so accustomed to bending everybody around because they're a big corporate body," she said. "Well, that's not happening anymore—we've grown up. They've got to know that."

I asked if the company had threatened her with pulling out. She shook her head. "Our rubber prices are too good."

Later, she said, a little longingly, "Maybe it's time. Maybe it's time to think small, and to do what we can with our own."

Meg Riggs, the public-affairs officer at the U.S. Embassy in Monrovia, said that since Johnson Sirleaf's inauguration she had been deluged with calls from members of Congress who were eager to visit. Riggs had to explain that visits posed serious logistical problems. To prepare for Laura Bush and Condi Rice's daylong visit, the Secret Service had sent agents weeks in advance. Still, she said, "they all think that now Liberia is a good place to come." (Last week, Johnson Sirleaf came to Washington and addressed Congress; she is also scheduled to meet with President Bush.)

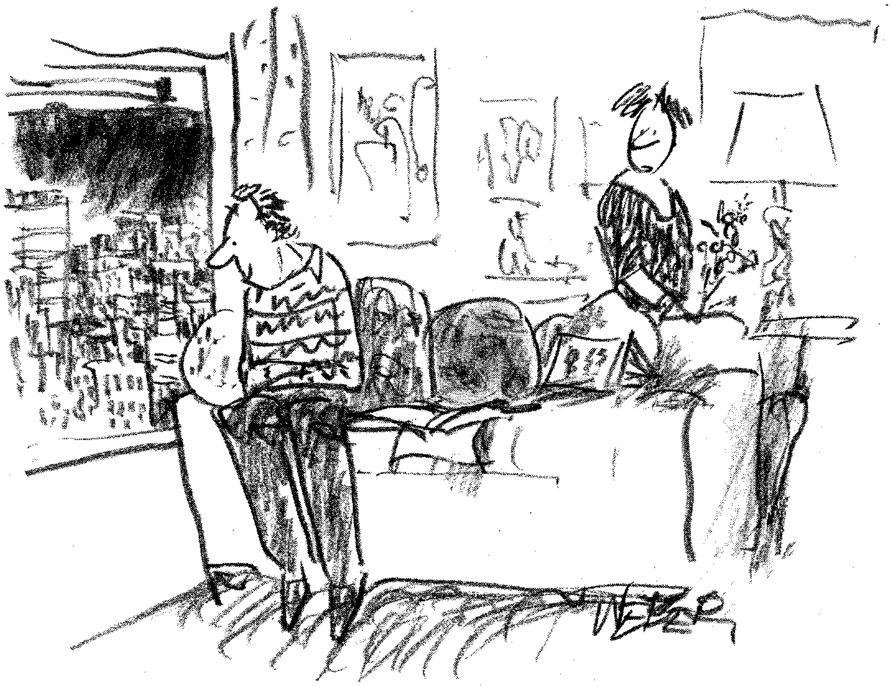
In one of our talks, Johnson Sirleaf said, "The festivities have ended, no doubt, and so we're not as much on the radar screen as we were a month ago, when the excitement of 'Africa's first democratically elected woman President' drew a lot of crowds. But we also needed for the festivities to end, because we've got a few problems here, and we need to go to work."

I told her that I'd lived in Liberia as a boy, and that I was struck by its decline.

Johnson Sirleaf replied, "You know, if we get the resources, the technology, the manpower, we can fix the streets in six months. But we have the problem of a value system that has been destroyed—where violence, the dishonesty, the dependency is what has characterized our nation over the past twenty years. That is the more difficult problem. We're going to have to start at the primary-school level, teaching the young children ethics, morality, values."

When we spoke, Johnson Sirleaf referred to herself as a technocrat, but in Liberia her image is also imbued with a passionate, and at times fetishistic, spiritualism. She is often called the Mother of Liberia, as she was in Paynesville. She is also called the Iron Lady.

"It's because I represent all the things our nation represents," Johnson Sirleaf said. "I have my roots in the indigenous part of our nation, from my two grandmothers, who were illiterate," she said. "I also represent the defiance and the rebellion of our nation. I've been part of its intellectualism, and with the progressives. I represent those who have paid the price; I've been to prison. But I've also been on the international scene, where I've achieved acclaim—I represent the whole zodiac of the Liberian contradictions, and I know the Liberian potential. If there is anybody who can bring change, it's someone whose life experience represents all the good *and* the bad." ♦



"That's not the thrum and rumble of the great metropolis—that's the dishwasher."

СУПЕР СЛОТ
ВИРТУАЛЬНОЕ КАЗИНО

FICTION

A LOVE LETTER

BY GARY SHTEYNGART

First, I would like to fall on my knees in front of the I.N.S. headquarters in Washington, D.C., and thank the organization for its successful work on behalf of foreigners everywhere. I've been welcomed by I.N.S. representatives several times upon arrival at John F. Kennedy Airport, and each time was better than the last. Once, a jolly man in a turban stamped my passport after saying something incomprehensible. Another time, a pleasant black lady nearly as large as myself looked appreciatively at my stomach and gave me the thumbs-up. What can I say? The I.N.S. people are just and fair. They are the true gatekeepers of America.

My problems, however, rest with the U.S. State Department and the demented personnel at their St. Petersburg Consulate. Since I returned to Russia, some two years ago, they've denied my visa application nine times, on all occasions citing my father's recent murder of their precious Oklahoma businessman on Russian soil. Let me be frank: I feel sorry for the Oklahoman and his rosy-cheeked family, sorry that he got in my papa's way, sorry that they found him at the entrance of the Dostoyevskaya metro station with a child's amazed expression on his face and a red gurgling upside-down exclamation point on his forehead, but after hearing of his death nine times I am reminded of the old Russian saying: "To the *khui*, to the *khui;* he's dead, so he's dead."

This, then, is my love letter to the generals in charge of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. A love letter as well as a plea: Gentlemen, let me back in! I am an American impounded in a Russian's body. I have been educated at Accidental College, a venerable Midwestern institution for young New York, Chicago, and San Francisco aristocrats, where the virtues of democracy were often debated at teatime. I have lived in New York for eight years, where I have been an exemplary American, contributing to the economy by spending more than two million U.S. dollars on legally purchased goods and services, including the world's most expensive dog leash. I have dated my little Rouenna Sales—no, "dated" is the wrong term. I have roused her from the Bronx working-class nightmare of her youth and deposited her at Hunter College, where she is studying to become an executive secretary (and where,

THIS PAGE: BEE FLOWERS; RIGHT: DANIEL BISKUP/LAIF/REDUX

in my absence, she is in danger of succumbing to the overtures of Hunter College's writer-in-residence and schmuck extraordinaire, Jerry Shteynfarb).

The generals in charge of the I.N.S. have surely seen it all. Migrant Mexicans chased by coyotes across the Rio Grande. Africans sealed inside shipping containers so that they can sneak into the country, sell sunglasses by Battery Park, and then send food back to their children in Togo. But have they ever seen a rich and educated person impale himself upon a flagpole flying the Stars and Stripes? Have they ever seen a person whose wallet contains the U.S.-dollar equivalent of a dozen American dreams prostrate himself before them for a chance to see the South Bronx once more?

Because that's where she is. Or, rather, where she's at. On the corner of 173rd Street and Vyse Avenue, on a brick housing-project stoop riddled with stray cheese puffs and red licorice sticks, my girl Rouenna has draped her naked lap with Hunter College textbooks. What wouldn't I give to plow straight into the bounty of her caramelized breasts, both covered by a tight yellow tee that informs me in chunky uppercase script that "G" is for Gangsta, as beautiful brown children run around us, engulfed by summertime happiness, yelling to each other, "When I get out, *puta*, I'm gonna break your fuckin' face, I fuckin' swear."

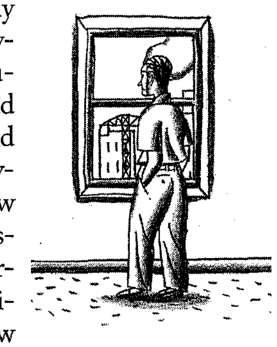
I am Misha Borisovich Vainberg, of St. Petersburg, Russia, age thirty, a grossly overweight man with small, deep-set blue eyes, a pretty Jewish beak that brings to mind the most distinguished breed of parrot, and lips so delicate you would want to wipe them with the naked back of your hand. The good news is that when you're an incorrigible fatso like myself—three hundred and twenty-five pounds at last count—and the son of the one-thousand-two-hundred-and-thirty-eighth richest man in Russia, all of St. Petersburg rushes out to service you: the drawbridges lower themselves as you advance, and the gorgeous palaces line up alongside the canal banks thrusting their busty friezes in your face. You are blessed with the rarest treasure to be found in this mineral-rich land: you are blessed with respect. Yet respect is not enough.

I arrived back here in July of 1999, ostensibly to visit my beloved papa for the summer, completely unaware that he was about to murder an Oklahoma businessman over a ten-per-cent stake in a nutria farm. But from the moment I bought my ticket I had a premonition that I wouldn't be returning to New York anytime soon.

You know, this happens a lot to Russians. The Soviet Union is gone, and the borders are as free as they've ever been. And yet, when moving between the two universes, you sense the logical impossibility of a place like Russia existing alongside the civilized world; of Ann Arbor, Michigan, sharing the same atmosphere with, say, Vladivostok. It's like those mathematical concepts I could never understand in high school: If, then. If Russia exists, then the West is a mirage; conversely, if Russia does not exist, then and only then is the West real and tangible. No wonder young people speak of "going beyond the cordon" when they talk about emigrating, as if Russia were ringed by a vast cordon sanitaire. Either you stay in the leper colony or you get out into the wider world and try to spread your disease to others.

I left. But my papa stayed and prospered. And when he picked me up at the wretched Petersburg airport upon my return there was something like incumbent victory upon his prune-dry, oddly sober face. He tickled my stomach as we walked out of the terminal and made a manly poke at my *khui*. He pointed proudly at the armada of Mercedeses ready to ferry us to his four-story *kottedzh* on the Gulf of Finland. "Not bad, these new times," he said to me. "Like an Isaac Babel story, but not so funny."

For his dissident Zionist activities in the mid-eighties (particularly for kidnapping and then peeing on our neighbor's anti-Semitic pooch in front of the Leningrad headquarters of the K.G.B.), my father had received a two-year sentence. It was the best gift the authorities could have given him. The months he spent in prison were the most important of Papa's life. Like all Soviet Jews, Papa had been trained as a mechanical engineer in one of the city's second-tier universities, and yet he was a scheming working-class boy at heart, not terribly different from his criminal cellmates with the greasy necks and unshaven noses. Placed in this element, Papa fronted the gangster talk. He devised all kinds of cigarette-related prison capers. He turned bread crumbs into shoe polish and shoe polish into wine. By the time Beloved Papa got out, two things had happened: Gorbachev had graciously called off most of that annoying, unprofitable Communism, with the long lines and detonating television sets, and Beloved Papa had met everyone he would need to know in his reincarnation as a Russian oligarch. All those Georgians and Tatars and Ukrainians with the sweaty-brow entrepreneurial spirit so beloved of the American Consulate. All the Ingush and Ossetians and Chechens with the casual attitude toward public violence that would create the fine explosive Russia we know today. These men could throw a punch, strangle a hooker, fake a customs form, hijack a truck, blow up a restaurant, start a shell company, buy a television network, run for parliament. Oh, they were kapitalists, all right. As for Papa, he had the social skills of an alcoholic and a good Jewish head on him. That is, until June 15, 2001, when a land mine placed on the roof of his armored sedan decapitated him on the Palace Bridge.



I'm a modest person bent on privacy and lonely sadness, so I have very few friends. My best buddy in Russia is a former American I like to call Alyosha-Bob. Born Robert Lipshitz in the northern reaches of New York State, this little bald eagle (not a single hair on his dome by age twenty-five) flew to St. Leninsburg eight years ago and was transformed, by dint of alcoholism and inertia, into a successful Russian biznesman renamed Alyosha, the owner of ExcessHollywood, a riotously profitable DVD import-export business, and the swain of Svetlana, a young Petersburg hottie. A skinhead on the metro once described him as a *gnussnyi zhid*, or a "vile-looking yid," and I think most of the populace sees him that way. I certainly did when I first met him, thirteen years ago, as a fellow-undergraduate at Accidental College, where he was steadily becoming an insufferable Nabokovian. One frozen night our first semester, both of us stoned and gorging on Moon Pies, Bob Lipshitz and I swore to exchange identities. I would become Snack Daddy Vainberg, a hip-hopping American multiculturalist; he would speak Russian without an accent, and learn to flash a sour, slightly menacing smile.

After being turned down by the U.S. Consulate for the fifth time this year, I went to meet Alyosha-Bob at the Neptune's Catch restaurant. His table was tucked away under the restaurant's sputtering four-story waterfall, far from the hurly-burly provincialism at the roulette wheel. A naked girl draped in a fishnet greeted me. "Would you like to swim with me in the Crazy Pool, Mr. Vainberg?" she asked, bunching her young buds together with both hands.

"Not right now, sweetie," I said. "Just get me some lobster knuckles in butter sauce and a bottle of Cognac."

We were not to dine alone that night. Alyosha-Bob had brought along a colleague, a grizzled old man in a green Armani suit, eyes yellow around the pupils, who stared at me with great emotion, as if he wanted my money. "This is Captain Belugin, of the St. Petersburg militia," Alyosha-Bob said in perfectly accented Russian. He gestured to me. "And Misha Vainberg, of course, is known by all."

"I've got to get out of this country," I said to Alyosha-Bob. I burped into my hand and prepared to wipe the tear that was forthcoming. "Everything has its limits. I'm not just some educated, Westernized animal you can kick in the mug."

"No luck at the American Consulate? Perhaps I can help you," Captain Belugin said amiably. "You see, I am originally from the Republic of Absurdsvanï, land of oil and grapes. Absurdistan, as we like to call it. I'm a Russian by blood, of course, but I also know the ways of the infamous Svanï and Sevo people, those lusty southern black asses, those cretins of the Caucasus. Now, one of my friends in Svanï City is a counsellor at the Belgian Embassy. A European of great learning and propriety. I wonder if for a small sum he could arrange for your citizenship in the Flemish Kingdom."

"That sounds like a sensible idea," Alyosha-Bob said. "What about it, Misha? If you get a Belgian passport, you can travel all over the world. We could fly down to Absurdistan next week. I own a branch of ExcessHollywood there."

I pictured myself sitting at a zippy Belgian café watching a multicultural woman in a thong eating a frankfurter. Did such things happen in Brussels? In New York they happened all the time.

"So, Belugin," Alyosha-Bob addressed the Captain. "What's it going to cost for Misha to get his Belgian passport?"

"What will it cost? Nothing, nothing," Captain Belugin said, waving it off. "Well, almost nothing. A hundred thousand dollars for my Belgian friend, and a hundred thousand for me as an introduction fee."

For the first time in an eternity, I felt a current of pure pleasure wend itself around my beleaguered liver and up my bloated lungs. Freedom was upon me.

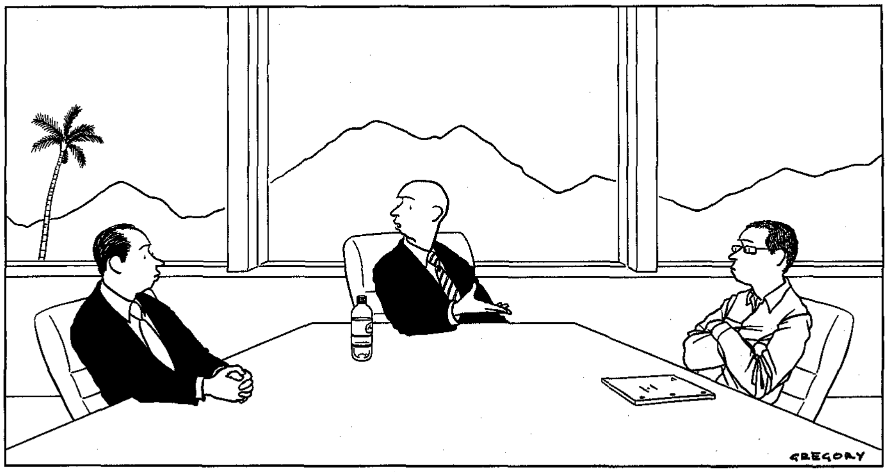
"Now, here's what I want you to do," Captain Belugin said. "As soon as you land in Absurdistan, go to the Park Hyatt Svanï City and talk to Larry Zartarian, the manager. He'll make all the necessary arrangements. You'll be a Belgian in no time."

The waitress in the fishnet set down my Cognac and lobster knuckles, lightly tapping my shoulder with her nipple. "Belgium," she said. "You're a very lucky man, Misha Borisovich."

"You're a great big cosmopolitan whore," Alyosha-Bob said to me, "but I love you."

"You're a traitor to your country, but what can be done?" Captain Belugin said.

I reflected upon their words and raised a toast to myself. "Yes, what can be done?" I said. "Everything has its limits."



"Seth, here, is one of the best young creative compromisers in the business."

• •

The arrivals terminal in Svanï City resembled a post-Mongolian yurt made of tinted glass, corrugated steel, and the occasional exposed pipe—the kind of generic design favored by mineral-rich nations teetering between Eastern exotica and Western anonymity. Inside, we found a cool, open metal shed filled with perfume counters and stores dispensing freshly baked baguettes along with the most cultured of yogurts, and miniature flags of various nations under the oversized flag of Microsoft Windows NT, which hung limply from the rafters to remind us that we were all global citizens who loved to travel and compute.

But the Absurdi citizens were not yet accustomed to the new world order. Despite the trappings of modernity around them, they rushed toward passport control, shouting in their incomprehensible native tongue.

Alyosha-Bob had a multiple-entry Absurdi visa, which entitled him to join an expedited lane, while I stood in a long queue for foreigners, waiting to get my visa photographs taken. Help was on the way, however. A group of fat men in blue shirts with brick-size epaulets on their shoulders were soon circling around me, eying my own bulk with warm southern eyes. One of them had a camera hanging from his neck. "Excuse me," he said in Russian, the lingua franca of the former Soviet empire. "Who are you by nationality?"

I sadly held up my Russian passport.

"No, no," the fatty laughed. "I mean by nationality."

I saw what he was after. "Jew," I said, patting my nose.

The photographer put his hand to his heart. "I am very honored," he said. "The Jewish people have a long and peaceful history in our land. They are our brothers and whoever is their enemy is our enemy also. When you are in Absurdsvanï, my mother will be your mother, my wife your sister, and you will always find water in my well to drink."

"Oh, thanks," I said.

"A Jew shouldn't have to wait in line to have his picture taken. Let me do it for you right away. Smile, Mister!"

I was handed a small photograph. "Now, remember what I said about my mother being your mother?" the photographer asked. "Well, sadly, our mother is in the hospital with a collapsed liver and a keloid scar on the left ear. Would it be possible—"

I had already prepared several U.S. hundred-dollar bills for this kind of eventuality, one of which I handed to the photographer. "Now we must go to the line for the visa-application blank," the photographer said. "Oh, look! A colleague of mine wants to speak to you."

It seemed I would also find water in this man's well to drink. "Why should a Jew have to wait in line for a visa-application blank?" he wondered. "Here! Take one!"

Two hundred dollars later, an older fat man, the skin around his eyes turned into pure leather by a lifetime of sleep apnea, came over to me and made the sounds of a steam engine. "Let me help you fill this out," the man puffed, taking out a pen and unfurling the fearsome four-page visa application. "Name?"

He wrote it down, then looked over his handiwork. He squinted carefully at the combination of "Vainberg" and "Mikhail." He looked at my body type and my soft red lips. "Are you the son of Boris Vainberg?" he asked.

"Boris Vainberg, deceased," I said, my eyes watering dutifully. "He was blown up by a land mine on the Palace Bridge."

The old man whistled to his colleagues. "It's Boris Vainberg's son!" he shouted. "It's Little Misha!"

"Little Misha!" his colleagues shouted back. "Hurrah!" They stopped extracting money from dazed foreigners and waddled over to me, sandals slapping against fake marble. One of them kissed my hand and pressed it to his heart.

"What are you doing here, Little Misha?" I was asked. "Did you come for the oil?"

"To be honest—" I started to say.

"You know, Little Misha, your father once sold an eight-hundred-kilogram screw to K.B.R.! He was some sort of subcontractor. He took them for five million! Ha-ha."

"What's K.B.R.?" I asked.

"Kellogg, Brown & Root," my new companions said in unison, shocked that I wasn't aware of such an institution.

"The American oil-services company. Halliburton's K.B.R. unit runs half the country."

"And my father cheated them?" I asked brightly.

"And how!"

"My father was a great man," I half spoke and half sighed. "But I'm not here for the oil."

"Ah. So are you here to buy Belgian citizenship from Jean-Michel Lefèvre, at the Belgian Consulate?"

I looked around apprehensively. "Maybe," I said.

"Smart man. It's no fun to have a Russian passport."

"Did your father ever mention our little gang at the airport?" the older man inquired.

The others looked up at me expectantly, their stomachs leaning toward mine as if trying to make its acquaintance. "He said a bunch of fat crooks were robbing Westerners at immigration," I said.

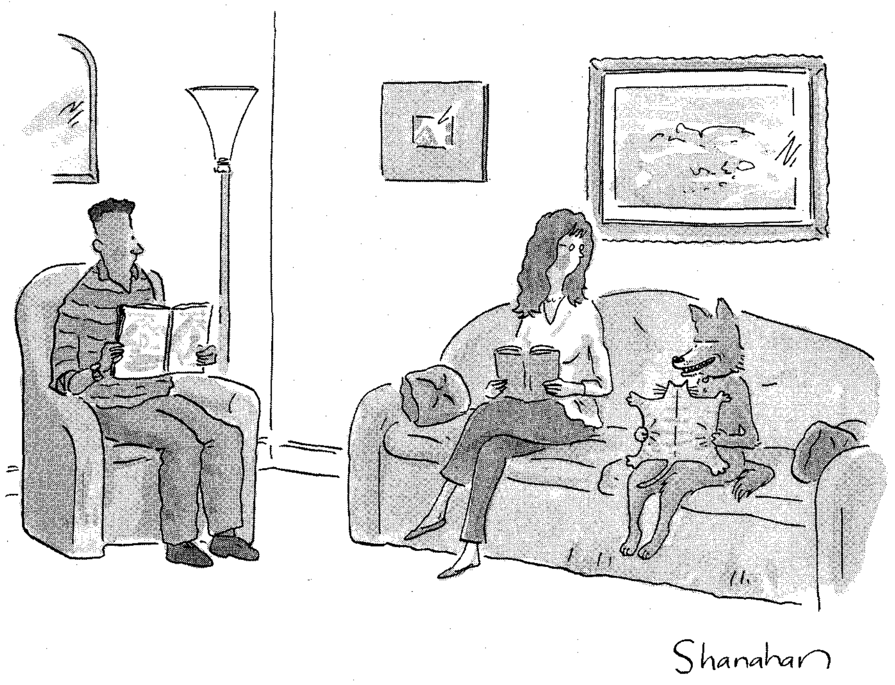
"That's us!" they cried. "Hurrah! Boris Vainberg remembered us!" The older man commanded his colleagues to give me back the hundred-dollar bills. My passport was immediately stamped and I was ushered past the immigration and customs points and into the sunshine, where Alyosha-Bob waited with his car and driver.

The Absurdi heat surrounded me as if I had entered a lit stove. It wiped out the moisture in my mouth; its invisible flames worked their way into the crevice between my tits, searing away the damp. My sweat glands could not keep up with the requirements of a three-hundred-and-twenty-five-pound body. I was on fire. Lord help me! I thought as the air-conditioning of the German sedan kicked in. Help me survive this southern inferno.

The country around me looked pretty much the way I felt. Tired. The landscape consisted of gray-brown lakes surrounded by the skeletons of oil derricks and the modern spheres of refineries. Trailer trucks bearing the logo of Kellogg, Brown & Root swerved ahead of our car, drivers honking at us maniacally.

Svanï City clung wearily to a small mountain range. We took an ascending road away from the gray curve of the Caspian Sea until we reached something called the Boulevard of National Unity. We passed shops of unmistakable wealth, if somewhat curious provenance, an espresso emporium named Caspian Joe's (a bright-green rip-off of a famous American chain), and an Irish theme pub named Molly Malloy's crouching drunkenly behind imported ivy and a giant shamrock.

After Molly's, the boulevard turned into a canyon of recently built glass skyscrapers bearing the corporate logos of ExxonMobil, British Petroleum, ChevronTexaco, Kellogg, Brown & Root, Bechtel, and Daewoo Heavy Industries, and, finally, the identical Radisson and Hyatt skyscrapers staring each other down from the opposite ends of a windswept plaza.



The Hyatt lobby was an endless skylit atrium where multinational men buzzed from one corner to another with the hungry, last-ditch exasperation of late-summer flies. Alyosha-Bob ordered a penthouse suite, and a glassed-in elevator hoisted us forty stories through the sunny atrium, so that the next thing I knew I was looking at a happy Western parody of a modern home, with marble countertops on everything from the desks and the nightstand to the bathroom sink and the coffee table. For a second, I thought I had actually arrived in Europe. I muttered the word "Belgium," fell to my knees, doubled over, and bid the waking world goodbye.

Rouenna came to me in a dream. She stood in a field of autumnal grass, backlit by a nearly extinguished sun, the locks of her scrappy dark hair alternating yellow and brown. She wore simple blue coveralls that made her body hard to fathom. Her skin had a pink, childlike quality, which made me think that she had been impregnated by that bastard Jerry Shteynfarb. In the distance, a neon sign hoisted between a pair of birch trees flickered with different words. "EVROPA." Then "AMERIKA." Then "RASHA."

Rouenna held out a shiny green apple. "It's eight dollars," she said.

"I'm not paying eight dollars for an apple," I said. "You're not doing right by me, Rouenna."

"This is the best apple in the world," she said. "It tastes like a pear." She spoke with an educated mid-Atlantic accent, her face radiant but impassive, as if she had suddenly got rich.

"I'm trying to cut out the trans fats," I said. "No more partially hydrogenated oils. I'm going to eat only slow food from now on. I'll lose weight. You'll see."

"Eight dollars," Rouenna insisted.

I stuck my hand inside my heart and took out precisely eight U.S. dollars, which I gave to her. Our hands barely touched. "What's going to make you love me again?" I asked.

"Take a bite," she said.

The apple flooded my mouth with freshness, as if I were biting the color green. I tasted pear, as promised, but also rosewater and white wine and my beautiful dead mother's sweet cheek. The roof of my mouth froze in wonder, as if stroked by an invisible ice cube. I tried to speak, but only gurgling came out. I wanted to hug Rouenna, but she lifted up her hand to stop me.

"Be a man," she said.

I gurgled some more, flapping my arms in front of me.

"Make me proud," she said.

I woke up with puddles of drool flowing down both cheeks. I was still on the floor of our Hyatt penthouse, my arms spread out as if I were Jesus at the end of his life. "I flipped you over on your back," Alyosha-Bob said. "You were gagging."

Apparently, it was the next morning, our wood-and-marble suite flooded with light, as if we were living inside a golden humidor. "You've got a message from the hotel manager," Alyosha-Bob said. "The guy Captain Belugin told you to look up."

"Dear The Respectable Misha Vainberg," the note said. "We are dripping with delight now that you have choosen to stay with us at Park Hyatt Svanï City. Your father was big lover for us. Now he is dead, our ship has run aground. Kindly visit the lobby when you are convenient and ask for Your Faithful Servant, Larry Sarkisovich Zartarian."

As I stepped into the corridor, I was waylaid by a tall tanned beauty with electric lips, a clingy little camisole reaching down to her hot pants. "Golly Burton, Golly Burton!" she said. "You Golly Burton?" She poked at me with an audacious finger. Her face was as powdered as an American doughnut.

"Eh?" I said.

"Golly Burton? K.B.R.? Thirty-per-cent discount for you." She grabbed my hand and pressed it to her wet forehead. "Ooofa, I have such hot temperature for Golly Burton."

"I don't understand this 'Golly Burton,'" I said in Russian. "Do you mean Halliburton? Thirty-per-cent discount for Halliburton?"

The woman spit on the floor. "You're a Russian?" she hissed. "Fat, dirty Russian! Don't touch me! Disgusting Russian!" She stomped away on her impossible high heels.

Zartarian was a short, unattractive man with a sporty, receding hairline compensated for by an outrageously thick goatee. Given all his nervous pleasantness, one got the sense that his endlessly aggrieved mother lived beneath his desk, shining his shoes and tying the laces into double knots.

"Sit, Mr. Vainberg, sit." Zartarian pushed me into a sumptuous leather container. "Is there enough room for you in there? Should my girl fetch you an ottoman?"

I grunted approval and looked around. The manager's office was dominated by an oil portrait of a dapper white-haired gentleman handing an oddly shaped cake to what looked like his porky, mustached son. Both men were smiling slyly at the viewer, as if inviting the beholder to share in their cake, the Kellogg, Brown & Root logo floating between them in a blurry supernatural haze.

"The old guy's the local dictator," Zartarian explained. "His name is Georgi Kanuk. He's giving Absurdistan to his son Debil for his upcoming thirtieth birthday. K.B.R. completes the trinity. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Halliburton."

"So the cake represents the country," I said. The misshapen torte was indeed studded with candles shaped like miniature oil derricks. "What does it all mean?" I asked.

"Kanuk is about to croak," Zartarian informed me. "They're gearing the people up for a family dynasty. There are two ethnic groups in Absurdistan—Svanï and Sevo. Kanuk and his son Debil are of the Svanï persuasion, so the Sevo aren't too happy with that."

"Enlighten me," I said. "What's the difference between the two groups?"

"Sevo, Svanï, they're all identical half-witted ignoramuses," the manager said, switching to excellent American English. "These people aren't called the cretins of the Caucasus for nothing."

"How did you perfect your English?" I asked him.

"I got lucky," the manager said. "I was born in California. Grew up in Glendale."

"So you're an American!" I said. "And a Valley Boy, too. How blessed your life must be. But how did you end up here?"

Zartarian sighed and put his head in his hands. "I went to Cornell's School of Hotel Administration," he said. "It was the only Ivy League school I could get into. My mother forced me to go. I just wanted to work in film, like everyone else. I hate the hospitality industry," he continued. "They made me the youngest Hyatt manager in the world just because I can speak Russian. Tell me, why did all this history have to happen to me?"

I remembered a piece of unfinished business that was bothering me. "Larry, why won't the hookers in your hotel sleep with Russians?"

"They've got an unofficial service provider's contract with K.B.R. There's so much business on that end, my girls all got big heads now. 'No more dirty Russians,' they tell me. 'No Chinese, no Indians. Golly Burton or we go home to our villages.'"

Zartarian reached over and stroked my arm below the elbow. "Your luck's about to change," he said. "Go down to the Beluga Bar. In a few minutes, this little native guy is going to show up. We call him Sakha the Democrat. He works for some local human-rights agency. Buy him a turkey burger with fries and he'll take you to meet Jean-Michel Lefèvre, of the Belgian Consulate. Just follow him out of the hotel after lunch and I guarantee you you'll be a Belgian by sundown."

The poolside Beluga Bar was sweltering. On one side of the pool, the hotel's male and balding guests were gorging themselves on plates of sturgeon and freshly grilled hamburgers. On the other side of the pool, the Hyatt's hookers had arranged themselves on green chaise longues and were fanning one another with abandoned copies of the *Financial Times*, occasionally ululating the name of their favorite American company, Golly Burton, to the oilmen.

Alyosha-Bob was sitting next to a young man in khakis and a striped polo shirt, who was scanning a large Hyatt menu with skeptical eyes, his finger running down the price column. He had a familiar-looking cold sore. As I approached the table, I tried to remember his name. "Josh?" I said. "Josh Weiner?"

Weiner looked up at my encroaching shadow. "Snack Daddy?" he said. "Holy shit! Bob just told me you were down here. What's the word, Big Bird?"

"Class of '94, right?" I said. "You had

the six-foot bong on College Street. What was your house called again?"

"Ghetto Fabulous House," Weiner said. We gave each other an urban smack of the palm, knocked our fists together, and shot an imaginary "finger gun" at each other.

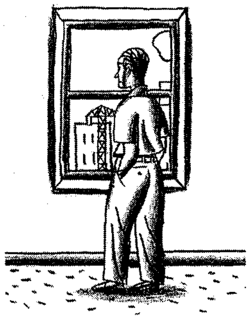
"Remember how the freshmen used to rub your belly for good luck before midterms?" Weiner said. "Mind if I give it a rub now, Snack?"

Actually, I remembered this belly-rubbing ceremony all too well. The humiliation of so many little white hands casually stroking my love pouch in the dining hall. How I begged all those Noahs and Joshes and Johnnies to stop. "I'd prefer it if you didn't," I said. "My analyst says it reinforces certain behavioral patterns. Child-rearing issues and such. It makes me feel violated."

"Uh-huh," Weiner said.

And then I recalled having read about Weiner in the "Alumni Notes" section of the *Accidental Herald*. "I hear you're with the State Department," I spat at him. The young diplomat's chair practically slipped out from beneath his slender East Coast frame. The foreign service had not been an acceptable career choice at Accidental College, where a surprising number of graduates went on to raise organic asparagus on the Oregon coast.

"Hey, easy, dog," Weiner laughed, scratching at his thinning cowlick. "If you think I sold out, like, check out my paycheck. Shit."



"So let's talk politics, dog," Alyosha-Bob said, changing the subject. "Word on the Absurdi street is that the Sevo are gonna go apeshit if Georgi Kanuk's idiot son takes over. What's the official U.S. position on this one?"

"We're not really sure," Weiner admitted, as he pillaged a bowl of complimentary smoked almonds. "We've got a little problem. See, none of our staff actually speak any of the local languages. I mean, there's one guy who sort of speaks Russian, but he's still trying to learn the future tense. You dogs are both from this part of the world. Do you know what's gonna happen after Georgi Kanuk dies? More democracy? Less?"

"Whenever there's any kind of upheaval in this country, the pistols come out," Alyosha-Bob said. "Think of the Ottoman rebellion of 1756 or the Persian succession of 1550."

"Oh, I can't think that far back," Weiner said. "That was then and this is now. We're in a global economy. It's in no one's interests to rock the boat. Look at the stats, homeboys. The Absurdi G.N.P. went up by nine per cent last year. The Figa-6 Chevron/BP oil fields are coming online in mid-September. That's like a hundred and eighty thousand barrels a day! And it's not just oil. The service sector's booming, too. Did you see the new Tuscan Steak & Bean Company on the Boulevard of National Unity? Did you try the ribollita and the crostini misti?"

A small, hook-nosed man was running our way. For a second, I thought I was looking at an exact copy of my dead papa in his lacklustre pre-oligarch days. Intelligent brown eyes, pet-goat beard, miniature yellow teeth. "Gentlemen, meet Sakha the Democrat," Weiner said. "He edits the glossy journal *Gimme Freedom!* It's one of our little projects here."

"Forgive me for being late, Mr. Weiner," Sakha panted, clutching at a bright-orange tie. "I hope you have not already eaten. I am so very hungry."

We summoned the waiter and I ordered three sturgeon omelettes and a pitcher of Bloody Marys. "May I have the chicken cordon bleu on a roll with tomato, pickle, and French fries, Mr. Weiner?" Sakha the Democrat asked. He brought his menu closer to the young diplomat. "It's the deluxe platter. . . . Right here. . . . Under 'Fresh from the Henhouse.' "

"Just get the chicken cordon bleu on a roll," Weiner said wearily. "They're cutting back our democracy budget. We can't afford deluxe platters anymore."

"I'll pay for your French fries, Mr. Sakha," I said.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Vainberg!" Sakha the Democrat cried. "It's so good to see a young man interested in pluralism."

"Sakha just came back from a democracy forum in New York," Josh Weiner said, "where he bought himself that nice orange tie. We provided airfare and five nights' accommodation. I'm assuming he paid for the tie himself. There certainly wasn't a budget line for it."

"It is a very nice tie," Alyosha-Bob said. "What is it? A Zegna?"

"I bought it at Century 21," Sakha said, nodding happily. "The actual color is called Dark Orange Equestrian. Some say the Svanï people were originally horse cultivators."

"You are Svanï by nationality?" I said.

"I am Sevo," Sakha the Democrat told me. "But it makes no difference. Svanï, Sevo, we are the same people. The distinctions are only useful for the ruling class."

"How so, Mr. Sakha?" I asked.

"So that they can better oppress us!" he cried. But, instead of elaborating, the Democrat spent the next fifteen minutes looking expectantly in the direction of the kitchen. The food finally arrived. After putting half the fries into his beat-up satchel—"for my three little girls"—Sakha dispatched the chicken cordon bleu faster than I could lay to rest my three sturgeon omelettes. The pickle he saved for last, savoring every wet crunch, his eyes moist with pleasure.

Journeying from the International Zone in a Hyatt jeep, Sakha and I had left a fledgling Portland, Oregon, and arrived in Kabul. Gone were the Hyatts and fake Irish pubs. In Svanï Terrace, the local business scene consisted of middle-aged men smoking cigarettes and gossiping around idled taxis. Rounding out the economy, younger men and boys ran around with buckets of sunflower seeds that they wrapped in paper cones and sold for five thousand absurdis a portion (about U.S. $.001, I later found out).

The McDonald's was situated behind a prominent square that during the Soviet era must have hosted its share of May Day parades but had been turned into an ad-hoc market for used remote controls. We walked past hordes of potential buyers aiming the orphaned devices at the sky, as if trying to turn off the scorching sun. Above the gleaming pile of remotes stretched an enormous mural of Georgi Kanuk and his son dancing together on the helicopter deck of a Chevron offshore oil platform.

"And who are you by nationality?" a

remote seller started to ask, but Sakha whisked me away to our destination.

We strode into the all-beef smell of the McDonald's, where I was regarded by the hungry customers as a kind of living embodiment of the fast-food life style. "Personally, I favor the slow-food movement," I loudly announced to a family splitting the smallest McDonald's hamburger into six parts so that each family member could have a little taste.

A tall, slim-hipped Slavic male in his late teens approached, stiff and official in his disposable McDonald's uniform. His Cyrillic tag labelled him a *dzhunior manadzher*. "Sir," he said. "Are you here to see M. Lefèvre?"

"Certainly I am not here to eat your criminal food," I replied.

"Please come with me," the junior manager said. "In the meantime, Mr. Sakha can enjoy a free cheeseburger. No, Mr. Sakha, not a Big Mac—one cheeseburger, that's all."

He took me through a door to a little cul-de-sac where garbage was stored in vast plastic containers. It took me a while to locate Jean-Michel Lefèvre, of the Belgian Consulate, who was lying face down atop a soiled mattress, both hands grasping the edges, as if he were Jonah just spat out of the whale.

"M. Lefèvre isn't feeling well," the slender Russian boy told me. "I'm going to get him something to drink."

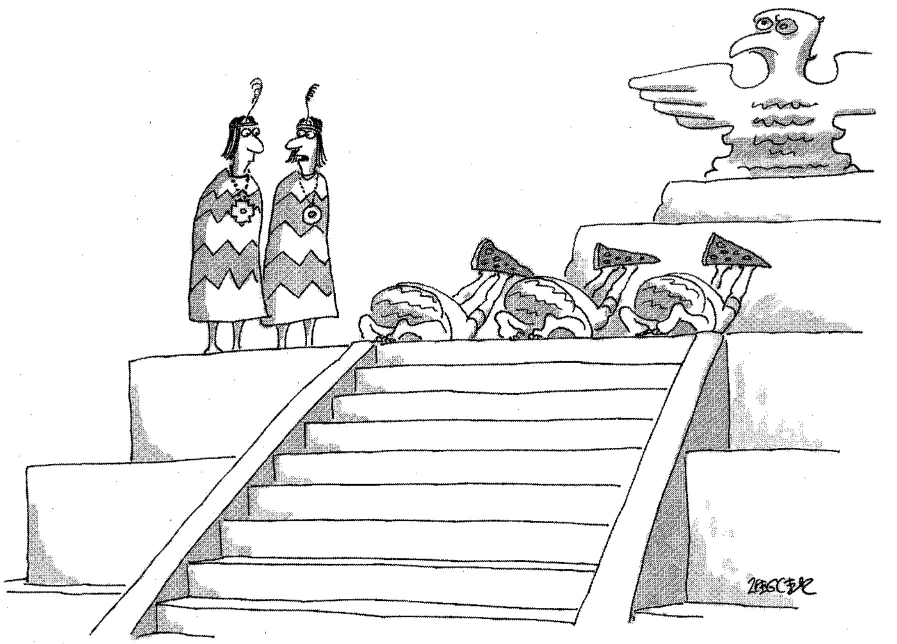
"Bring vodka," the Belgian bellowed in Russian into the mattress. Then he used his elbows to flip over onto his back so that he could get a proper look at me. "Mother of God," he said in English. "You're big. You're bigger than in Captain Belugin's photograph. You're the biggest thing ever."

"I am a big man, yes," I said. Lefèvre himself was a blond, emaciated fellow, likely in his early middle age, stubbly, red-eyed, and nicely browned by the Absurdi arrangement of sun, water, and sand. Whatever awful thing had happened to him must have happened quickly and irrevocably.

"So," Lefèvre said, with a smirk. "Who wants to be a Belgian?"

"I do," I said. Was he trying to make some kind of joke? "I have paid two hundred thousand U.S. dollars to Captain Belugin. Everything should be in order."

The McDonald's junior manager returned with a bottle of Flagman vodka and a McDonald's paper cup. He emptied the bottle into the cup, gently tilted Lefèvre's head, and poured the vodka into the diplomat's mouth.



"It being Saturday night, the gods have asked for pizza."

"Anything you want to know about your nation before you sign on?"

I considered all the things I wanted to know about Belgium. There weren't many. "You have this Queen Beatrix, no?" I asked.

"That would be Holland."

"And you have a shameful history in the Congo. Your Leopold was a monster."

"He's your Leopold now, Vainberg. Our Leopold. Our Leopold of the Black Sorrows." Lefèvre reached under the mattress and took out a business envelope, which he threw my way.

"According to official records," the diplomat told me, "you became a citizen of Belgium in Charleroi last summer. You were granted political asylum from Russia. You're a Chechen sympathizer or something."

I removed the passport from the envelope and pressed it to my nose, hoping to smell Europe—wine, cheese, chocolates, mussels, Belgian as opposed to McDonald's fries. All I smelled, of course, was my own odors deflected backward—a hot day, a tired man, hope tempered with sturgeon. "This is very good," I said.

Suddenly, we heard the sound of crashing china and cutlery. We looked toward the McDonald's, aware that the restaurant offered only plastic-and-paper service.

"What are these idiots doing now?" Lefèvre said.

Several middle-aged women with very full lungs were screaming inside the McDonald's. "Shit," Lefèvre said, as the recycling bins started to shake violently.

Sakha ran out of the McDonald's, his hands trembling with the yellow remains of a cheeseburger, his Zegna tie stained with a trail of ketchup. He tried to speak but could only sputter and whinny in an impotent intellectual way. It took the McDonald's junior manager to make the situation clear for us.

"Georgi Kanuk's plane has just been shot down by Sevo rebels," he said.

"I predict," Lefèvre said, "that we're all going to die here in Absurdistan."

A lone MIG-29 punched a hole through the stratosphere above us and swooped alarmingly over the gray bowl of the Caspian. The Svanï Terrace rumbled in its wake.

"We're Belgians!" I shouted at the diplomat, brandishing my new passport at him. "Who would want to hurt us?"

"What the hell, Jean-Michel?" the junior manager shouted, one hand raised in anger, the other draped passionately over his hip. "You told me there wasn't going to be a civil war until August. You said everything would be quiet through July. We would get the Vainberg money and leave. We were going to be on a plane to Brussels next week."

"They lied to me," Lefèvre said.

"Who lied to you?" the junior manager said.

"Everyone," Lefèvre said. "Sevo, Svanï, Golly Burton . . ."

I turned to Sakha, who looked as discarded as a burger wrapper. "Sakha, what's happening?" I said. "They don't shoot Belgians, do they?"

"Vainberg," Lefèvre said, "you have to do something important. You have to get the Democrat to the Hyatt immediately. Put him under Larry Zartarian's protection. It's not safe for him out here."

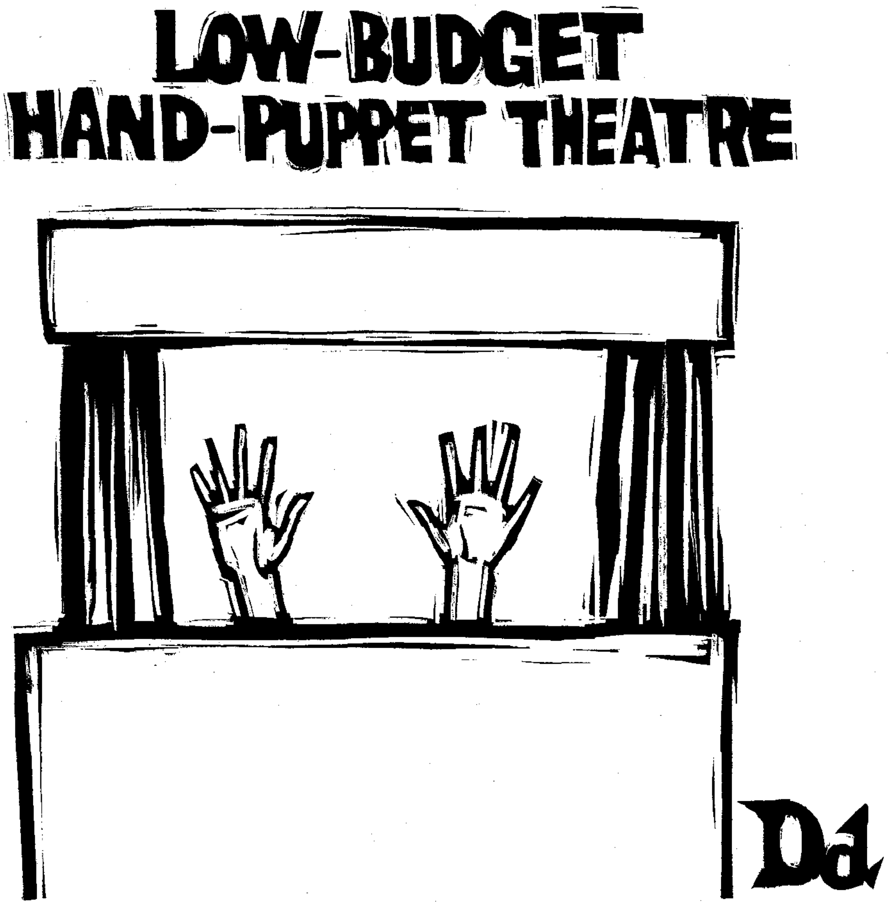
My heart beat like that of a young girl in love. I was blissful and manic at the same time. I wanted to attach an addendum to my love letter to the generals in charge of the I.N.S.: Exhibit A—Misha saving a democrat. Could anything be more American?

On the street, we became aware of what had caused the initial noise of crashing china and cutlery. The used-remote-control market was being pulverized beneath the tread of the advancing heavy infantry. I was looking at a convoy of stubby Caterpillars outfitted with battering rams, which I realized were Soviet T-62 tanks, followed by a ring of equally obsolete BTR-152 armored personnel carriers, forests of anti-aircraft cannons poking out of the roof hatches.

The sound of heavy machine-gun fire reverberated throughout the city. It was time to do something important and manly and American. "Go, go, go, motherfucker!" I yelled to Sakha. The jeep's alarm was blaring and a rear window had been partly smashed, but the imperious Hyatt logo had apparently scared off the thieving locals.

A passing T-62 had begun to rotate its barrel our way, like a slow child trying to make friends. "Drive!" I shouted to Sakha.

We careered down a half-assed side street. Wretched balconies groaned beneath laundry lines, terrified occupants peered out their windows; from every direction televisions cackled in the native tongue, announcing imminent disaster. The radio station was playing Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake," a sure sign that things were much worse than they appeared. We ran a gantlet of terrified city cats and swerved onto yet another narrow street.



"And Adam and Eve saw that they were naked, and they were ashamed."

"If they see that I'm a big democrat, they'll shoot me," Sakha said. "Georgi Kanuk's son is worse than his father. He ran the special forces. His hands are covered with blood. He'll want revenge for his father's death."

"You're with me," I said. "I'm a Vainberg. A Belgian. A Jew. A rich man. You're taking me to the Hyatt. We're important people, Sakha. Have faith in yourself."

"I'm calling my family," Sakha said, unholstering his phone. He started to cry as soon as the connection was made. "Did you take the girls to ExcessHollywood?" I heard him sob. "Did they have 'Toy Story 2'? Tell them I'll be home tomorrow and we can watch it together. Oh, my sweet little monkeys. Never let them go. I should have known this would happen. I should have applied for that fellowship at Harvard. I've been listening to Josh Weiner for too long."

"That's enough!" I commanded. "Wipe your eyes and turn off the phone. Be strong!"

Nearing the Hyatt and Radisson skyscrapers, we were caught in a mass of screaming and shoving pedestrians who were clearly bent on the same destination. Soldiers had surrounded them and were tearing through their documents. They slapped people across the head and fondled young girls with giggly pleasure. At the heart of the action, a young soldier was trying to tug a chain off a matronly neck while punching the woman in the mouth. "Thief!" she was yelling. "Save me, citizens! Thief!" For some reason I laughed nervously at the large woman's strife. I was reminded of something deeply Soviet—a person's dignity being slowly dismembered in front of others.

Respectful of the Hyatt sign on our jeep, the soldiers waved us through. As the Democrat maneuvered into the Hyatt's circular driveway, he braked sharply. I fell sideways out of the jeep. An officer was running up to us, followed by a line of soldiers. Sakha was screaming. Two words: "Colonel Svyokla."

In a novel written during the golden age of Russian literature, a man named Svyokla would look like a *svyokla;* that is to say, he would be red as a beet. But in the era of modern produce Colonel Svyokla's head resembled a giant genetically modified peach, fraudulently spherical and ripe, the skin dry and crisp.

"Misha Vainberg," Colonel Svyokla said, shaking my hand. "What a pleasure. My mother will be your mother . . ."

While he addressed me, the soldiers were dragging Sakha out of the Hyatt jeep. "I used to work for your father, Boris, as his local oil consultant," Colonel Svyokla said, gamely ruffling my hair. "His death was a terrible tragedy. A major light was snuffed out for the Jewish people. My condolences."

At the far edge of the driveway, a group of men had been assembled at gunpoint. They stood there with a terrible resignation, their ties hanging limply around their necks, arm hair glistening below their short sleeves. Sakha stood among them.

"There has been an attempted Sevo putsch," the Colonel explained to me. "We'll take care of it in a few minutes. Go back to the hotel, Misha."

I ran as quickly as my weight allowed and burst headlong into the chilled Hyatt lobby. Alyosha-Bob and Larry Zartarian caught me in an embrace and we all fell to the marble floor.

"You have to . . . you have to . . . ," I said, scrambling all over them, my hands flopping up and down, as if I were swimming toward a distant lighthouse.

"There's nothing . . . there's nothing . . . ," both of them were saying in answer. "There's nothing we can do."

I spotted Josh Weiner among a crew of oil workers, their hands clutching afternoon beer mugs. "Josh!" I cried. "Josh, help me. They've got Sakha."

The diplomat was looking deep into his palms, which he had stuck out in front of him. He turned his hands over carefully, never shifting his downward gaze.

"We've already filed a protest," I heard him say.

"The people they're going to shoot, they're not rebels. They're all democrats!"

"Did you hear what I just said, Vainberg?" Weiner said through gritted teeth. "We've filed a protest."

I turned around and made for the sunlight. "Misha, no!" Alyosha-Bob shouted, throwing himself upon me, but I knocked him out of my way with one enormous fist.

I emerged on the driveway to the sound of angry male voices. "On the ground!" the soldiers were yelling to Sakha and his cohorts. I felt them. I felt the soldiers with their warm ethnic blood and clan loyalties, their adolescent swagger and inbred psychoses, their made-up heraldry of lamb pie, plum brandy, and a hairy virgin for the wedding feast.

"On your knees!" the soldiers shouted. They had fallen in line behind the men, one soldier to a man, a ratio that did not bode well.

Sakha's eyes fixed on me. There were tears on his face—I couldn't see them, but I knew they were there. "Misha!" he shouted to me. "Mishen'ka, please. Tell them to stop. They will listen to a man like you. Please. Say something."

I felt Alyosha-Bob's hand tugging on my sleeve, his little body pressing into mine. "Golly Burton!" I yelled. "K.B.R.!"

The soldiers looked to Colonel Svyokla, who nodded. They shot the men in the backs of their heads, the bodies of their victims jerking up in unison with the discharge, then hitting the driveway with tremendous speed, a cloud of loose gravel swirling around them.

Forty stories above the war, civilization à la Hyatt enclosed us.

The globe of Alyosha-Bob's head hovered over me, blue veins forming rivers of concern, his nose a living, breathing subcontinent. He was wearing nothing but sweatpants, his naked chest sporting an Orthodox cross and a Jewish Chai. (Recently, my friend had been flapping his fish lips about adding some religious meaning to his life.)

"I ordered Buffalo wings from room service," he said. "They're in the living room. There's Black Label in the minibar."

The Buffalo wings were dry and inauthentic and it took four buckets to satisfy me. I sucked on the brittle bones, enjoying the mild tomato-based "hot sauce" dribbling past my chin and onto my Hyatt bathrobe.

Alyosha-Bob was typing on his laptop with one hand and switching television channels with a hefty zapper with the other. He was trolling for news about Absurdistan. "CNN, nothing; MSNBC, nothing; BBC, almost nothing; France 2, something, but *je ne comprends pas* what it is. . . . Looks like we're stuck with ORT."

He turned on one of the Kremlin-controlled Russian networks, all Putin all the time. Sure enough, the Russian President was giving a press conference. He looked the way he always did, like a mildly unhappy horse dipping his mouth into a bowl of oats. "Absurdsvanï is an important partner for Russia, strategically, economically, and culturally," Putin sadly imparted into the microphone. "We hope for a cessation to the violence. We implore the Sevo leadership to respect international norms."

Alyosha-Bob switched to another Russian government channel. Come to think of it, they were all government channels. A young Western-looking reporter stood in front of a marble slab etched with the words "Park Hyatt Svanï City."

"Hey, that's our hotel," I said.

"So far, a modest death toll," the reporter was saying. "Sixty-five people killed in the conflict, twelve of them armed Sevo coup plotters shot by security forces in front of the Hyatt hotel."

"Sevo coup plotters?" I said. "Armed? They were just democrats with expensive ties."

The reporter continued, "As a result of the personal mediation of President Putin, a temporary ceasefire was signed today in Svanï City."

"That's a good sign!" Alyosha-Bob said. "They might reopen the airport."

The reporter continued, "Today, the new President of the Republic, Debil Kanuk, son of the murdered state leader Georgi Kanuk, met with the leaders of the Sevo rebellion, who are calling themselves the State Committee for the Restoration of Order and Democracy, or SCROD, according to the English acronym."

"That's a fish, isn't it?" I said. "They named themselves after a fish."

"Not even a good fish," Alyosha-Bob said.

The Svanï leader, his oily forehead dripping pancake makeup beneath the klieg lights, shook hands with his older but better-dressed Sevo counterparts. They all smiled as if they had just returned triumphantly from a duck hunt.

And then I recognized one of the men standing next to Debil Kanuk. Crisp olive uniform, red fists hanging like pomegranates above his hips. It seemed as if Colonel Svyokla were smirking directly at me, daring me to save Sakha's life.

He spoke calmly into the microphone. "Until the murderous Sevo plotters responsible for downing President Georgi Kanuk's plane are apprehended," he said, "the Republic's borders will remain sealed and closed to all air traffic. There will be justice for the Svanï people."

"Damn!" Alyosha-Bob said. "What the hell, Misha? They're not going to let the foreigners leave? What do they want from us? This is bullshit!" He stopped to look at me. "Are you crying, Snack?"

I touched my face. It was true. My cheeks were soaked and my nostrils were filled with the sea breeze of my own body salt. In my mind, it was all happening again. The driveway. The spent bullet casings. The rising cloud of gravel.

Alyosha-Bob switched off the television and walked over to me. "Come on, Snacky," he said. He made an open-armed gesture toward my body.

"Go ahead," I sobbed, leaning toward him. He sat down and put my head on his warm, naked shoulder. The tears kept coming, easily, aimlessly, with regard for nothing but the salty streams they forged across my friend's body.

Our embrace was interrupted by the dull but steadily increasing roar of an aircraft. Alyosha-Bob sprang to the window.

A Chinook helicopter, a kind of mechanized air cow, bulky and graceless beneath its two rotors, was flying over the oil fields, headed for the International Zone. I made out the inscription on its side, white English letters on camouflage.

"Get your suitcase. And your Belgian passport, too."

"Why?"

"Fall of Saigon, '75."

"*Je ne comprends pas.*"

"Shake a limb, Snack. We're gonna make a run for the Embassy."

The U.S. Army had arrived in Svanï City.

The American Embassy was situated in the shadows of the ExxonMobil skyscraper, a freshly built rectangle of salmon-hued glass with Art Deco bands of chrome meant to evoke permanence and easy history. After the recent attacks on U.S. Embassies in Africa, a moat of trenches and razor wire had been built around the American outpost in Absurdistan. The gathering crowds, however, were well equipped with wire cutters and the like, and they charged the compound with bravado, as if the incoming helicopters had convinced them that they were extras in a Hollywood historical drama.

The majority seemed to be of college age, dressed to look as non-threatening and American as possible. They carried signs that listed their reasons for being accepted aboard the hovering Chinooks: "21 Yr. Old Girl, NOT Prostitutka, Have Student Visa to Californian University at the Northbridge + Mine Family Has Gas." And: "Please Let Me Go with You—Secret Police Will Die Me, Because I Political Against Debil Kanuk Dictator." And: "We ♥ Halliburton, K.B.R. #1, Go Houston Rockets!" Another was hoisted by a grizzly old pensioner, a simple retired laborer by the look of him, whose sign was nonetheless written in perfect English: "We Are No Worse Than You Are. We Are Only Poorer."

"American and E.U. citizens coming through," Alyosha-Bob shouted, pushing aside the little brown Absurdis around us.

Our U.S. and Belgian passports held aloft, we were quickly diverted toward a V.I.P. line where the aspirants were taller and whiter and fatter. The only dark standout was Larry Zartarian, the Hyatt manager, who was trying to shove his mother into the arms of a consular officer, shouting, "Cysts! Deadly cysts! She needs emergency medical care at Cedars-Sinai. My mother will be your mother! Take her away from me!"

We spotted Josh Weiner scurrying around behind several Marine guards, dribbling saliva into his cellular phone and waving around a clipboard. "Weiner!" Alyosha-Bob shouted. "Class of '94!"

Weiner flashed us a bullshit grin and waved the clipboard, then pointed to his watch to indicate that he was busy.

"Oh, come on!" Alyosha-Bob shouted. "Don't make me write to the alumni newsletter!"

The diplomat sighed, slammed shut his phone, and came over to us. "What kind of citizenship does he have?" Weiner said, gesturing my way but not looking me in the face.

"Misha's an E.U. citizen," Alyosha-Bob said. "He's a Belgian."

"For right now, they're just letting Americans go up," Weiner said.

"That's fine," I said. "Don't worry about it, Joshie. I'll just die here like your friend Sakha."

"Take it easy, Misha," Alyosha-Bob said.

"That's not fair," Weiner said.

"Hey, Joshie, did you file the protest?" I said.

"What protest?"

"You told me you were going to file a protest. Remember? Right before they shot Sakha? How's that protest going for you? Any word yet?"

"Oh, whatever, Snack Daddy," Weiner said. "Keep thinking it's all my fault. I'm just a low-level State Department employee. You think I actually save people's lives? You think I'm Oskar fucking Schindler? I did everything I could for Sakha. He ripped us off left and right, too. That Zegna tie was just the tip of it. He 'borrowed' baby formula from the commissary and he used improper channels to get his niece a scholarship to Penn State. These people are operators. Don't kid yourself."

I took a step toward Weiner, a violent step, but Alyosha-Bob's body was already between us. "You know something, Snack?" Weiner said, backing away. "Go ahead. Get the fuck out of here. I really don't care anymore. Go eat Cheetos by the ton. Just don't consider me your friend, all right? Because you never were."

He waved us through, toward the line of fully accredited Americans queuing at the foot of the ExxonMobil building, bewildered-looking Embassy families toting precious duffelbags, oilmen garrulously sharing in the fun of evacuation, slapping one another on the back and fondly recalling the Hyatt's full-tilt prostitutes.

"Hey, big boy!" one of these specimens shouted at me. "Hey, scumbag!"

Big boy? Scumbag? I put both hands between my chests to indicate having taken affront. Before me stood a bow-legged orangutan in drawstring shorts and a U.S.S. Nimitz cap.

"You don't even know, do you?" my antagonist said, doffing his cap so that a halo of deeply receding red hair floated above him to match his angry words. "You fucking Russians don't even remember who you kill. Fucking animals."

"Oh, shit," Alyosha-Bob said, once again thrusting his small frame between me and my tormentor.

"What?" I said.

"Your father killed my uncle," the American explained. "Over nothing. Over a rat farm."

"Huh?" I was dizzy with confusion and low blood sugar.

"You know, I Googled your father," the putative relative of the dead Oklahoman shouted at me, "and he was just a total prick. Assholes like him ruined your country and ruined this one, too. They should send all of you to The Hague, stand you up on war-crimes charges."

A cry dislodged itself from somewhere between my sternum and my groin, from someplace wet and lonely and orphaned. I found myself lapsing into the heavily accented English of my first years in the States, as I shouted, "BELOVED PAPA WAS NO TOTAL PRICK!"

And with those words I reached past Alyosha-Bob and clipped the American on the side of the head, one ferocious squishy paw striking him in a place relatively soft and unbreakable, not far removed from the small clump of brain that kept his vitals going.

My antagonist collapsed immediately and started roaring out of shame and pain. Momentarily, Josh Weiner and his superiors were on the scene, men in pressed shirts and sober ties who held me back from the violence that had instantaneously gone out of me. "Beloved Papa was no total prick," I said quietly, nodding in affirmation. "He was a Jewish dissident. A man of conscience."

"My uncle had three children," the American groaned. "Three orphaned children, you fat useless fuck."

"We're sorry about all this," Alyosha-Bob beseeched the diplomatic staff and the arriving marines. "My friend lost his temper. He's a Belgian, that's all."

"Sir," the tallest and grayest of the diplomats told me, "we have to ask you to leave the Embassy grounds."

I looked into his officious face, smooth and hard like an actor's or a politician's. "These are Exxon grounds," I said miserably.

"You're the son of Boris Vainberg," the diplomat said. "I know all about you. There's no way I'm letting you board a United States aircraft."

"He's nothing like his father," Alyosha-Bob said. "He's not a killer. He studied multiculturalism at Accidental College. Weiner, tell them." He looked around for our classmate, but Josh Weiner was nowhere to be found.

"You go on without me," I told Alyosha-Bob. "There's no reason for you to stay here. Go."

"You'll die here," Alyosha-Bob said. "You don't understand anything."

I looked at him, trying to decide if I should be angered by his remark. Did I understand anything? My understanding had limits, that was certain, but my friendship with Alyosha-Bob had none. My friend stood before me, pained and small—a thirty-one-year-old man who seemed older by twenty years, as if each year he'd spent in Russia had cost him three years more.

"Sir." A marine was laying his hands upon me, inducting me into some sacred ritual with violent overtones.

"Go," I said to Alyosha-Bob. "I'm not as helpless as you think. Go back to Petersburg. Go to your Svetlana. We'll meet up in Brussels someday."

Alyosha-Bob stretched out his arm to embrace me, thought better of it, turned around so that I wouldn't see his tears, and walked toward the sheets of ExxonMobil glass vibrating beneath the arrival of another mighty Chinook. I went partly limp, nearly tipping over the marine, as other American hands picked up the slack and guided me toward an exit, toward a hole in the razor wire that was big enough to fit me. ♦

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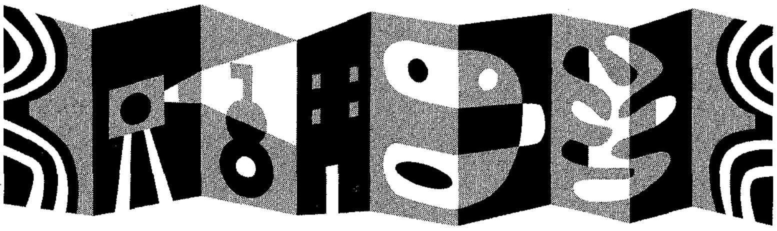


ON TELEVISION

TRIPLE THREAT

Polygamy goes mainstream in HBO's "Big Love."

BY NANCY FRANKLIN

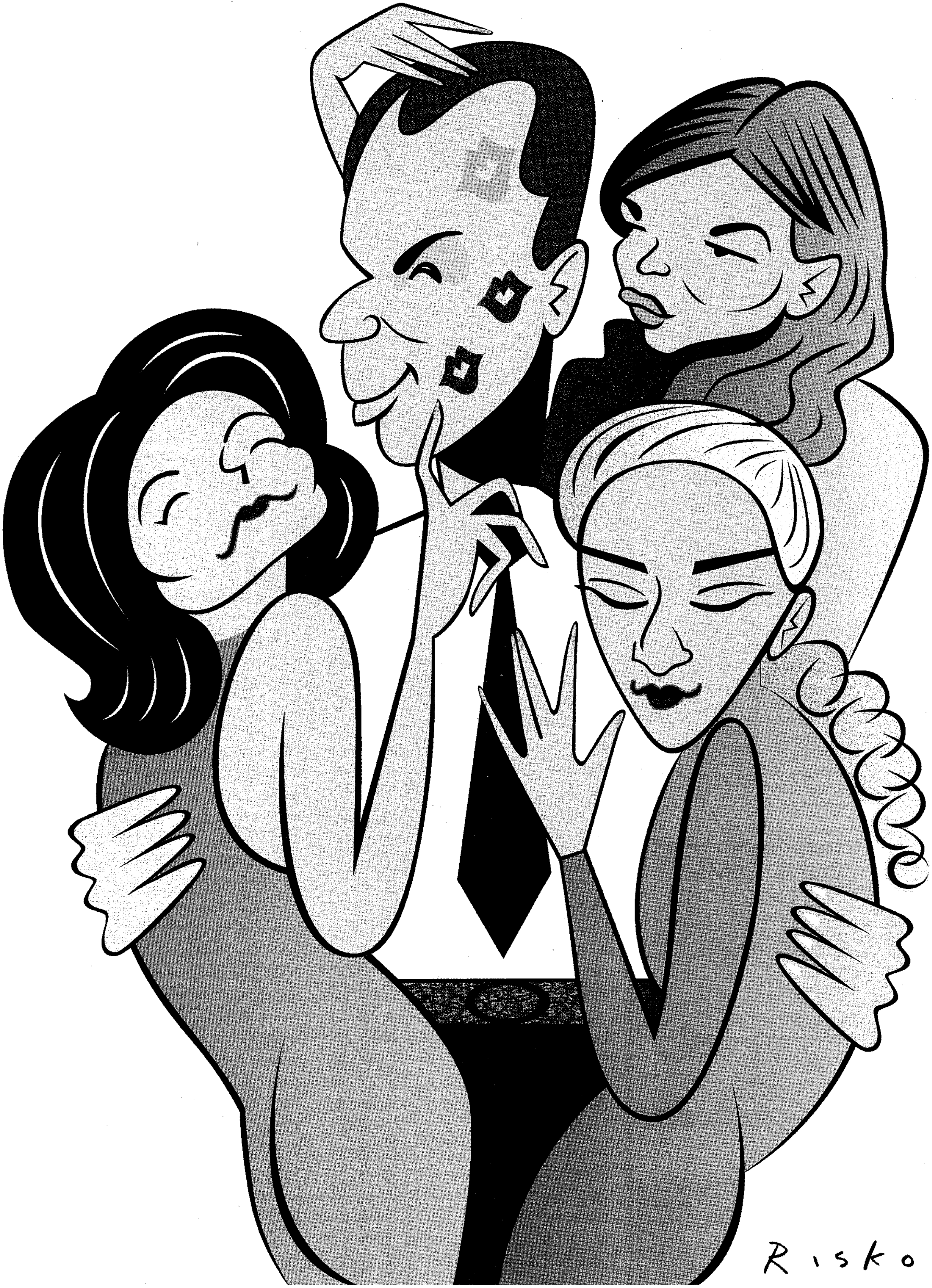
If you pity a show that débuts on HBO after an episode of "The Sopranos," because of the inevitable comparisons (though things have worked out all right for "Deadwood" in that regard), you've got to weep for a show that débuts after the first episode of a new season of "The Sopranos," especially when viewers have been waiting for that new season for almost two years and know that it marks the beginning of the end of the series. That's the situation in which "Big Love," a series about a polygamous marriage in present-day Utah, found itself a couple of Sundays ago; HBO thought either that "Big Love" was so strong that it wouldn't suffer when juxtaposed with What May Be the Greatest Television Show Ever—or that it was so anemic that it would need "The Sopranos" to carry it. Whatever the case, it's hard to imagine that anyone who watched the season première of "The Sopranos," with its devastating, mind-blowing ending, was in any shape to watch *anything* afterward. Of course, the digital wonders of video on demand and of DVRs—and wheezy old VCRs, let's not forget them, in the last throes of their existence—make it possible to see any show at any time these days. (There is also cable TV's helpful practice of repeating shows throughout the week.) And, in fact, these new ways of watching TV, which have become more widespread since the last time "The Sopranos" came around, may account for the steep drop in viewership for this season's première relative to that of the previous three seasons: the Nielsen ratings don't yet account for all the permutations of video on demand and DVRs. Or else it was the ABC show "Desperate Housewives," which airs opposite "The Sopranos" and has big fat juicy ratings. But don't weep for "The Sopranos." Pity the people who don't watch it.

In any event, the new, improved options for viewing are a good thing for "Big Love," too, since it's up against ABC's other big Sunday-night hit, "Grey's Anatomy." And for a lot of viewers "Big Love" is going to need time to settle in; it doesn't have much dramatic texture until about the fifth episode. Not much texture, but certainly a hook: who could resist at least checking out a show about polygamy? The hook has also snagged a boatload of cultural critics and reporters, commenting both on its controversial subject and on what it means that that subject has bubbled up to the level of acceptability for television.

The series was created by Will Scheffer and Mark V. Olsen, who are life partners as well as professional collaborators. They also serve as executive producers (as does Tom Hanks), and wrote five of the season's twelve episodes (and co-wrote another two). Scheffer and Olsen have said in interviews that they aimed to create a nonjudgmental portrait of plural marriage, and it's true that the series focusses more on the practical and emotional aspects of polygamy than on its moral or ethical aspects. (And "Big Love" is not meant to represent Mormonism; although there are plenty of polygamists in Mormon territory, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints officially outlawed polygamy in 1890.) Bill Paxton plays Bill Henrickson, who is married to three women. His first wife, Barb (Jeanne Tripplehorn), is his age peer, and the most mature of the First, Second, and Third Wives' Club. She's the one whom Nicki, wife No. 2, played by Chloë Sevigny, calls "boss lady," both behind her back and to her face, and with resentment rather than respect. Nicki, while appearing to be demure and docile (she often wears "prairie garb"—long skirts and blouses buttoned all the way up), is out of control. She looks as if she had chosen this life with full consciousness and self-awareness, and yet she's emotionally clueless. She's a little too much in touch with her inner child—not as the result of any New Age teachings but, we begin to suspect, because of abuse at the hands of her father. Margene is the name not of a low-fat spread but of Bill's third wife (Ginnifer Goodwin), a dewy, needy sex fiend who appears to be barely out of her teens. Actually, the exact ages and some of the background of the characters are still not fully established nearly halfway into the season; luckily, an advertisement in the Sunday *Times* and several other major papers right before the première gave some specifics. The ad, astonishingly, took up a third of a page in the weddings section of the *Times*, and was itself in the form of a wedding announcement—three announcements, in fact, proclaiming in turn the unions of Bill Henrickson with Barbara Dutton, Nicolette Grant, and Margene Heffman, with photographic portraits of all three couples. This ad—both its content and its placement—was, of course, meant to be "naughty," but I think it can be said to have achieved true naughtiness, without quotation marks. (The discussions at the *Times* about accepting the ad can only have been fascinating, and I'd pay to hear the reactions of the three real couples whose weddings were featured on the same page.)

At the beginning of the first episode, Bill gets out of bed in the morning and leaves a hundred-dollar bill on the nightstand. It's puzzling—how can a man with three wives make time for sex with a prostitute, and why would a man who wanted three wives need another woman? This is the first of many wry twists: the woman *is* one of his wives,

ROBERT RISKO



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and what he's leaving on the nightstand is a supplement to her allowance. Bill steps outside into a pristine world—in this suburb of Salt Lake City, the sky is blue, the mountains loom majestically in the background, and the streets are immaculate. The overbright stagy lighting of the outdoor scenes underlines the artificiality of suburban life, and that feeling is reinforced when we see what's behind the three houses that Bill has bought for his wives. There's a finished swimming pool, but the rest of the back yard is just dirt; the whole setup seems provisional. Bill owns a large home-improvement store called Henrickson's Home Plus, and as the series begins he is just about to cut the ribbon on a second store. Yet he can't keep his own house—houses—in order. (The plurals that occur in the show are often funny: when Bill tells Nicki that he doesn't want her father around, he says, without stopping to take note of the variation on the usual phrase, "He's not welcome in my homes.")

Bill's second store has caused problems for him. Nicki's father, Roman Grant, is the leader of a large polygamist compound in the vicinity, and he insists that, contractually, Bill owes him fifteen per cent of the store. Harry Dean Stanton, as Roman, makes your skin crawl from the first time you see him. Roman is a "prophet"—a standing that gives him the right to be a manipulative, Godfather-like figure, with moral and financial power over the compound. (And sexual power: he has, he says, thirty-one children and a hundred and eighty-seven grandchildren. Roman's evil nature is confirmed when he turns up with the young girl—a teen-ager—who is his latest wife. She's so insulated from the outside world that when she sees an iPod she says, "Is it for music?") Bill, in order to lessen the complications of his domestic arrangements (and to preserve his God-given right to be, essentially, a sugar daddy, though it is Barb, first among equals, who is in charge of disbursing expense money to the other two women), largely keeps his business matters from his wives, but Nicki would never believe that her father is trying to extort money from Bill anyway; she is, in the worst possible way, Daddy's little girl. She's Bill's little girl, too: trying to prove to her that she's special to him, he reminds her, "You're the only one I gave a personal checking account to." Paxton is bland and nearly expressionless in most of his scenes, explaining himself and getting emotional only when absolutely necessary. He rarely interferes with the child-rearing. (Which means that, as a father, he is more or less a do-nothing, old-school dad.) There isn't room in this crowded family for another strong personality.

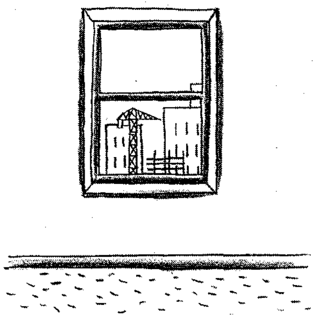
Bill, we find out in the second episode, was forced out of the compound at the age of fourteen. It's hard out there for a young polygamist: the old men have first dibs on the young girls. Still, Bill and Barb have hewed to what they see as the true principles of polygamy, not to the oppressive ways of the compound. Barb, talking to her thoughtful teen-age daughter, Sarah (beautifully played by Amanda Seyfried, who was one of the mean girls in "Mean Girls"), characterizes the compound this way: "The seediness, the corruption, old men preying on young helpless girls. Prophets? Try con artists." "Big Love" sets up Bill's clan as an exemplar of family values, with some of the same problems that conventional marriages can have: petty jealousies; misunderstandings; conflicting timetables when it comes to sexual desire; in-law problems; a toddler eating mayonnaise out of the jar while you're trying to change the diaper of a screaming baby; and requests of the "can you pick up the dry cleaning, I'm running late" variety. This is what makes the show clever and transgressive, though the cleverness is harped on a little too much.

What never wears thin is the wonderful acting; this is one of the best casts to appear on TV in a long time. Try turning off the set when Grace Zabriskie, who plays Bill's deranged mother, is on; it can't be done. There are many great details—a closeup shot of Nicki's feet bouncing up and down with excitement when she hears that her father is coming to call, polygamists from the compound driving along singing an old-time gospel song while a new-world G.P.S. device beeps and says, "Turn right." Though not as compelling as "Twin Peaks" was, "Big Love" evokes something that David Lynch did in that series: the way deep weirdness can hide in plain sight, right on our own street. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

A Question of Torture, *by Alfred W. McCoy (Metropolitan; $25).* From the start of the Cold War to the early nineteen-sixties, the C.I.A. spent billions of dollars developing psychological tools for interrogation. The agency cast a wide net, funding a Canadian study that involved administering electric shocks to subjects in drug-induced comas, and recruiting people like Kurt Plotner, a Nazi scientist who, in his search for a truth serum, had tested mescaline on Jewish prisoners at Dachau. The eventual conclusion was that cheap, simple methods (for example, enforced standing) worked best, and were also more acceptable to the public than outright physical violence. McCoy skillfully traces the use of these methods from the Phoenix program in Vietnam—which was designed to ferret out high-level Vietcong, although of the more than twenty thousand people it killed most were civilians—to the actions of agency-trained secret police in Honduras in the nineteen-eighties, and the treatment of hooded detainees at Abu Ghraib.

The Awful End of Prince William the Silent, *by Lisa Jardine (HarperCollins; $21.95).* In 1584, William of Orange, Stadholder of the Low Countries, was shot to death in his home in Delft by a French assassin, Balthasar Gérard, who used a wheel-lock pistol, then a fairly recent invention. Gérard, a Catholic fanatic, had responded to Philip II of Spain's offer of a twenty-five-thousand-crown reward to anyone who could kill the tolerant Protestant prince, who once remarked that Catholics and Protestants "in principle believed in the same truth, even if they expressed this belief in very different ways." The threat to security posed by the pistol, lethal and easily concealed, shocked Europe. In England, the possibility of a similar attack on Queen Elizabeth led to increased surveillance, arrests, and interrogations, which, in Jardine's view, provide a parallel with current reactions to religious terrorism.



The Book of Trouble, *by Ann Marlowe (Harcourt; $23).* "I want to have an arranged marriage," Amir, a Princeton-educated Afghan émigré announces at a dinner party at Marlowe's West Village apartment. And then, over risotto with fall vegetables, he tells the other guests what he wants: "A seventeen-year-old virgin." They are horrified, especially when, a couple of months later, Marlowe begins an affair with him. Marlowe's second memoir—the first was about her time as a heroin user—candidly recounts her fascination with Afghanistan and the hungry, hopeless, clumsy progress of the affair. At times, her fetishizing of Amir's rugged build and exotic heritage inclines one to sympathy with her disapproving friends, but her sharp intellect rescues this faltering romantic narrative, and she provides an incisive and refreshing comparison of Afghan and Western social mores.

Stutter, *by Marc Shell (Harvard; $27.95).* Shell, a comparative-literature professor and a stutterer, examines stuttering from the perspectives of history, literature, popular culture, science, and personal experience. His discussion raises fascinating questions—Why do stutterers find relief when singing? Was Hamlet a stutterer? Why is Porky Pig's stutter funny?—and he provides an engaging discussion of the historical importance of speaking "properly." Regrettably, Shell, presumably striving for some textual equivalent of a stutter, encumbers his work with labored puns ("how gags gag"), odd catchphrases ("talk the walk or walk the talk"), and the modish deconstruction of words ("dis-ease," "dis-ability"). However, there are many interesting tidbits about famous stutterers (James Earl Jones, Moses, Marilyn Monroe, the Emperor Claudius, Henry James) and their techniques for overcoming the impediment.

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BOOKS

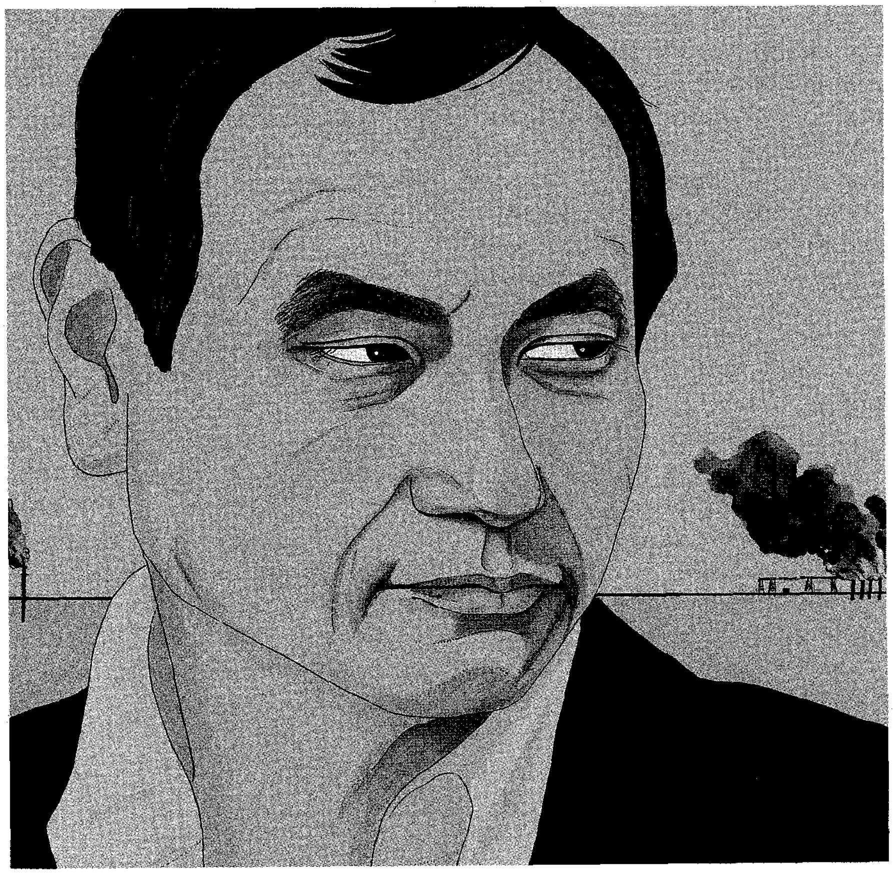
BREAKING AWAY

Francis Fukuyama and the neoconservatives.

BY LOUIS MENAND

On February 10, 2004, the columnist Charles Krauthammer gave the annual Irving Kristol address at the American Enterprise Institute, in Washington. The lecture was called "Democratic Realism: An American Foreign Policy for a Unipolar World." It defended the Bush Administration's policies of unilateralism and preëmption, and proposed that their application be defined by means of a doctrine: "*We will support democracy everywhere, but we will commit blood and treasure only in places where there is a strategic necessity—meaning, places central to the larger war against the existential enemy, the enemy that poses a global mortal threat to freedom.*" The new "existential enemy," Krauthammer said, is "Arab-Islamic totalitarianism," and he compared the war that the United States should fight against this entity to the war against Fascist Germany and Japan—a war committed to the eradication of a deadly and evil culture.

Francis Fukuyama was in the audience, and he could not believe the approval with which Krauthammer's speech was greeted. It seemed to Fukuyama that by the winter of 2004 the policies of unilateralism and preëmption might have been ripe for some reconsideration—they clearly had not performed well in Iraq—but, all around him, people were applauding enthusiastically. Fukuyama had always regarded himself as a neoconservative. He had had close relations with many of the leading figures associated with neoconservatism: Paul Wolfowitz, Albert Wohlstetter, Allan Bloom, Irving and William Kristol. Now he began to wonder if he still shared the world view of neoconservatives who, like Krauthammer, supported the Bush Administration's war on terror. The day after the lecture, Fukuyama ran into John O'Sullivan, then the editor of the *National Interest* (a journal founded by Irving Kristol), and told him that he would be writing a response to Krauthammer. That article ran in the summer, 2004, issue. It was called "The Neoconservative Moment," and in it Fukuyama announced that neoconservatism had evolved into a set of views that he could no longer support. Krauthammer published a response to Fukuyama's response ("In Defense of Democratic Realism") in the fall issue of the *National Interest*. Last spring, Fukuyama delivered the Castle Lectures, at Yale, in which he responded to Krauthammer's response to his response to Krauthammer's speech, and expanded his criticism of the Bush Administration. He proposed a new approach to foreign policy, which he called "realistic Wilsonianism." Those lectures have been expanded, in turn, and published as "America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy" (Yale; $25).



It's strange that Fukuyama ever saw himself unambiguously as a neoconservative.

TARA TOMLIN

Fukuyama argues that neoconservatism was founded on four principles. The first is "a belief that the internal character of regimes matters." Until the election of Ronald Reagan, American foreign policy during the Cold War was guided by the doctrine of "realism"—the theory that the national interest is best served by checking and containing existing Communist regimes and preventing the establishment of new ones, not by intervening in the internal affairs of other states. In a strict realist world view, every state is equally in competition with every other state, and that is the primary fact that a foreign policy must confront. Whether a given regime is liberal or oppressive toward its own people is, from a national-security standpoint, of secondary importance. Of course, the United States would like more liberal democracies in the world, because, historically, liberal democracies do not go to war against one another; but we are obliged to play with the cards that are on the table, and not all of them will be hearts. Thus, Richard Nixon, a career anti-Communist, following the instructions of his national-security adviser, the archrealist Henry Kissinger, went to China.

Neoconservatives are unhappy with this sort of agnosticism, which is why they were excited when Reagan started speaking of the Soviet Union as an "evil empire." Neoconservatives also supported the Reagan Administration's attempts to intervene in the internal affairs of Nicaragua, since—and this is Fukuyama's second principle of neoconservatism—they believe in the use of American power for moral purposes. Cold War liberals also believed in the use of American power; that's how the United States got stuck in Vietnam. But the Vietnam War (in the minds of the people who directed it) was fought to prevent Communism from expanding, not to roll it back in territories where Communists were already in power; the rationale was "stopping Communist aggression," not "liberating an oppressed people." When the Warsaw Pact countries overthrew their Communist regimes, and the Soviet Union dissolved, it seemed to many neoconservatives that the realists had been proved wrong: liberation was a legitimate and attainable goal of foreign policy. After September 11th, the next liberationist mission became clear.

Fukuyama identifies the third principle of neoconservatism as a "distrust of ambitious social engineering projects." After all, neoconservatism arose not in foreign-policy debates but in criticism by liberals of the programs of the Great Society in the nineteen-sixties. Kristol's definition is famous: "A neoconservative is a liberal who has been mugged by reality." Most neoconservatives of Kristol's generation had been members of the anti-Stalinist left in the nineteen-thirties and forties, and (Fukuyama says) they tended to see a connection between Great Society liberalism and the blind faith in economic and social planning that once led many leftists to believe that Soviet Communism was a genuinely progressive ideology.

This skepticism about the uses of state money and power to address social problems is paired with another skepticism—the fourth element of neoconservatism—about the "effectiveness of international law and institutions to achieve either security or justice." Neoconservatives have been especially dismissive of the United Nations, an organization that they regard as a charade kept alive by liberal piety about international coöperation and world peace. Again, there are bad nations and good nations out there. When everyone is obliged to pretend that all states are equally worthy of respect, moral authority becomes impossible. Fukuyama points out that in 2003 the chair of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights was Libya.

As its provenance suggests, "America at the Crossroads" is a polemic (a mild-mannered one), not a theoretical treatise on statecraft. Fukuyama's argument is that the war on terror, and, in particular, the invasion of Iraq, is not an application of neoconservative principles as he understood them. George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, and Donald Rumsfeld are not neoconservative intellectuals; they are right-wing messianists, and their prosecution of the war has been disastrous for American interests. They globalized a conflict that they should have sought to contain. "We are fighting hot counterinsurgency wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and against the international jihadist movement, that we need to win," Fukuyama writes. He goes on:

> But conceiving the larger struggle as a global war comparable to the world wars or the Cold War vastly overstates the scope of the problem, suggesting that we are taking on a large part of the Arab and Muslim worlds. Before the Iraq war, we were probably at war with no more than a few thousand people around the world who would consider martyring themselves and causing nihilistic damage to the United States. The scale of the problem has grown because we have unleashed a maelstrom.

The United States acted as though simple regime change in Iraq, with no adequate plans for reconstruction and economic development, were sufficient reason for declaring "Mission Accomplished." We now confront an expensive, long-term struggle to keep a fractious society from spinning dangerously out of control, and our unapologetic near-unilateralism has left us without much sympathy, or support, from our nominal allies. Fukuyama thinks that neoconservatives like Krauthammer either have been seduced by the rhetoric of liberation into thinking that deposing Saddam Hussein is the twenty-first-century equivalent of deposing Hitler or have abandoned neoconservative principles and turned into knee-jerk "American exceptionalists" who think that the superiority of our values authorizes us to act toward the rest of the world as benevolent hegemons, and exempts us from the considerations of deference and prudence by which we expect the behavior of other states to be constrained.

Although "America at the Crossroads" is intended, in part, for policy intellectuals—the journal-of-opinion writers and editors, political advisers, and think-tankers who deal with questions of governance from a philosophical point of view—Fukuyama is not, fundamentally, a policy intellectual himself. He is an original and independent mind, and his writings have never seemed to be constructed on a doctrinal foundation. He takes ideas seriously and he tries to see the big picture, and even if you think that he takes ideas too seriously, and that his pictures tend to be too big to help with the practical challenges of political decision-making in the here and now, his views on American policies and their implications deserve thoughtful attention. Such attention might begin, in the case of the present book, with the observation: No duh. It took Fukuyama until February, 2004, to realize that Charles Krauthammer, who has been saying basically the same thing since the end of the Cold War, is the intellectual cheerleader of a politics of American supremacy that appears to recognize no limit to its exercise of power? And that the Bush Administration, to the extent that it has any philosophical self-conception at all, operates on the basis of the crudest form of American exceptionalism? And that neoconservatism, whatever merits it once had as a corrective to liberal wishfulness and the amorality of realpolitik, long ago stiffened into a posture of reflexive moral belligerence about everything from foreign policy to literary criticism?

The present condition of the neoconservative movement is the outcome of a classic case of the gradual sclerosis of political attitudes. All the stages of the movement's development were based on the primitive psychology of the "break"—the felt need, as one ages, to demonize the exact position one formerly occupied. The enemy is always the person still clinging to the delusions you just outgrew. So—going all the way back to the omphalos, Alcove 1 in the

City College cafeteria, where Kristol and his friends fought with the Stalinists in Alcove 2—the Trotskyists hated the fellow-travellers they once had been; the Cold War liberals hated the Trotskyists they once had been; and the neoconservatives hated the liberals they once had been. Now the hardening is complete. Neoconservatism has merged with the politics that its founders, in their youth, held in greatest contempt: the jingoist and capitalist American right. We look from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but it is impossible to say which is which.

This helps explain why Fukuyama, instead of writing a straightforward indictment of the war on terror, apparently felt it necessary to present his position in the form of a "break" with neoconservatism—why Krauthammer, an entirely epiphenomenal figure in the creation and implementation of American policy, was the initial target of his indictment, rather than Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld. Krauthammer has ideas; Cheney and Rumsfeld—Fukuyama as much as says so—do not. The theory is what went wrong, so the theory is what must be fixed. Fukuyama's "realistic Wilsonianism" is the repaired version: Wilsonian because he wants to retain the spirit of liberal internationalism that informs neoconservative critiques of foreign-policy realism, but realistic because he recognizes the limits of military power and the need for multilateral coöperation and engagement. Let's continue to try to shape the world, but let's not be so stupid about it, is the general idea.

Still, it's a little strange that Fukuyama ever saw himself as unambiguously in the neoconservative camp. "America at the Crossroads" is not quite a recantation, because Fukuyama was quickly a dissident from the war on terror. His position has been consistent since 2002, when he warned against exaggerating the threat represented by Al Qaeda and other jihadists. But the seeds of his split with neoconservatism started before that. They appear, in fact, in the work that identified him publicly with neoconservatism in the first place. This is the famous article "The End of History?," which appeared in the *National Interest* in 1989 and became a book, "The End of History and the Last Man," in 1992. (A second paperback edition, with a new afterword, has just been published by the Free Press.)

"The End of History and the Last Man" is a deeply interesting book ("scandalously brilliant," Krauthammer says on the back cover, in a blurb evidently written when the marriage was still good). It is a meditation on world history—via the influential lectures of the French-Russian philosopher Alexandre Kojève, given in Paris in the nineteen-thirties—in the tradition of Hegel, Marx, and Weber. Because the original article appeared the year the Berlin Wall came down, and because the book appeared right after the formal demise of the Soviet Union, Fukuyama's thesis about the "end of history" was taken to be a kind of celebratory meta-historical frosting on America's victory in the Cold War. History (in Hegelian terms) had realized its Idea, and the Idea was us. Fukuyama has spent a great deal of time since 1989 explaining that this was not what he meant. His book was not about America or even about democratic ideals. It was about modernization, a subject on which his take is closer to Marx's and Weber's than to John Locke's or Adam Smith's.

Modernity, Weber said, is the progressive disenchantment of the world. Superstitions disappear; cultures grow more homogeneous; life becomes increasingly rational. The trend is steadily in one direction. Fukuyama, accordingly, interprets reactionary political movements and atavistic cultural differences, when they flare up, as irrational backlashes against modernization. This is how he understands jihadism: as a revolt, fomented among Muslim émigrés in Western Europe, against the secularism and consumerism of modern life. (This is also how he interprets Fascism and Bolshevism: as backlashes against the general historical tendency.) Jihadism is an antibody generated by our way of life, not a virus indigenous to Islam.

Fascism and jihadism are nihilisms; they cannot be co-opted into the modern system of pluralism, and so they have to be wiped out. But they stand, in a perverse way, for the dark side of disenchantment, which is that, as life becomes more rational and transparent, people lose the sense that there are spiritual forces in the universe greater than themselves. Supernaturalism goes, but so does the idea that anything transcends the biologically human. The "last man" was Nietzsche's term for the citizen of the completely modern society; "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart" was Weber's description. Fukuyama's thesis proposes a kind of fatalism that is worth resisting, but it is not an intellectual ornament on the edifice of American hegemony—or a rationale for invasion, occupation, and conversion of the non-Westernized world. The whole world will modernize eventually, Fukuyama believes, though (like Marx) he is not averse to some coaxing and shaping on the part of a cadre of advance-guard intellectuals and benevolent superpowers. He now argues—and, in this respect, "America at the Crossroads" announces a new dimension in his thinking—that economic development and the creation of social capital, "soft power," are the proper tools of foreign policy, and that regime change by forceful means is a discredited option. He is sliding back toward sixties liberalism. One hopes that others, inspired by his "break," will start sliding in the same direction. It would certainly be nice to see the independent intellectuals who should have known better when they loudly supported the Bush-Cheney war on terror explain publicly, as Fukuyama has done, where they went wrong. Who did they think was going to run that war, the Committee on Social Thought?

"The End of History" understood the outcome of the Cold War in a spirit quite different from that of the standard neoconservative account, according to which we won the Cold War because Reagan adopted a policy of liberationist interventionism. We changed the political regimes in Russia and its satellites, and the pieces of a liberal society just fell naturally into place there. Fukuyama thinks that we won the Cold War mainly because an unworkable system reached its inevitable point of collapse, helped by the actions and inactions of Mikhail Gorbachev; that, apart from oratory and some funding of pro-democracy groups, we did little in the way of intervention; and that we ought to thank our stars and decline to draw grand policy lessons. Grand lessons were drawn, though, and that is why so many American intellectuals believed that regime change in Iraq was not only readily achievable but cosmically mandated. If they thought that this is a view shared by the author of "The End of History," they know better now. ♦

THE THEATRE

THE EMPRESS JONES

The Wooster Group plays with race and gender in O'Neill's early work.

BY HILTON ALS

Imagine this: Your mother is a junkie and your father is a broken-down actor. You are reared in an atmosphere of deception and artifice. You have an older brother who, in an attempt to win your father's alternately hard and sentimental heart, tries to become an actor, too. What he lacks in ambition he makes up for in bitterness, guilt, and drink. You write poetry that owes a great deal to Baudelaire. You are drawn to the sea, which for a time, at least, allows you to cast off the angry ghosts you call your family and whose tainted blood is your own. You leave home, first for Central America, then for South America, first for one wife and then for another, and another. There are children—testaments less to your urge to procreate than to your desire to establish a model family that does not include your parents or your brother. Wives, children, security: each, in the end, is a mere buoy in the great salt sea of your imagination.

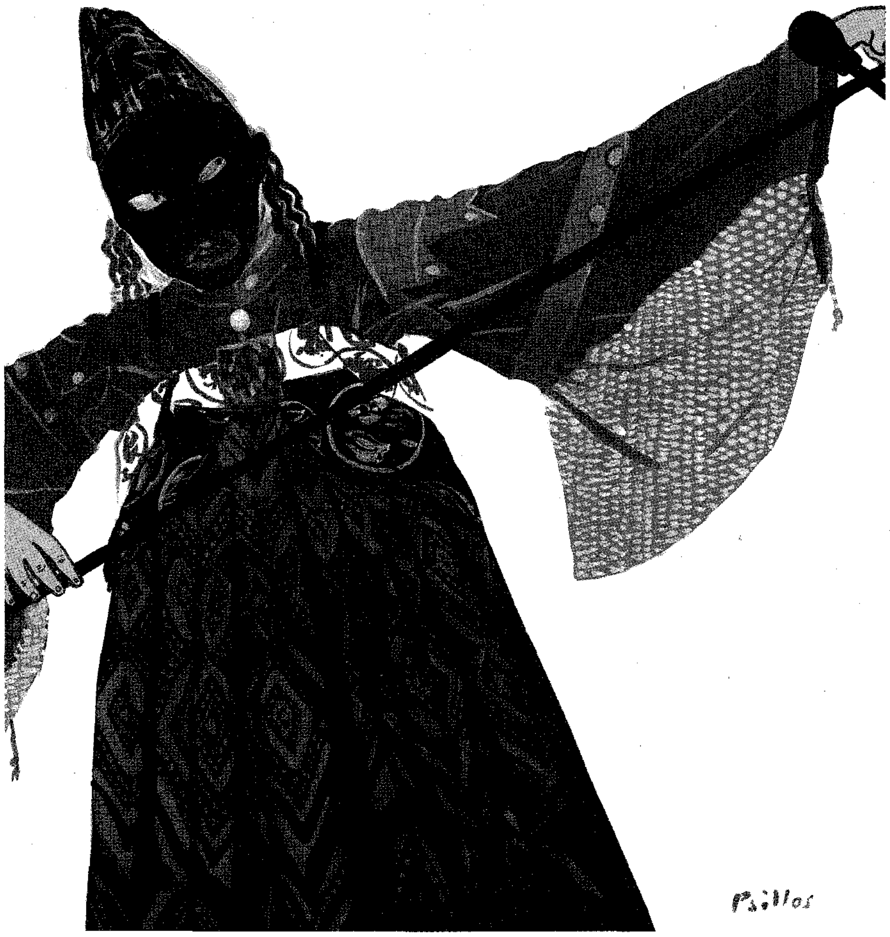
Our country's premier poet of the water, the New York-born playwright Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) confined a number of his doomed, anxious characters to boats and islands—relatively small spaces that not only serve the dramatic tension that is a hallmark of his style but also lend a mournful edge to his characters' monologues, the best of which sound like songs sung by landlocked sailors. Equal to O'Neill's fascination with the sea is his obsession with masks. He uses them not just as props but as shields with which his characters defend the illusions they have piled up in the effort to become themselves.

Race, too, can be a kind of mask. In the Wooster Group's current production of O'Neill's 1920 expressionistic "The Emperor Jones" (at St. Ann's Warehouse), the astonishing Kate Valk plays the title character—"a tall, powerfully built, full-blooded negro of middle age"—in blackface. Formerly a Pullman porter, Brutus Jones travels to an unnamed island in the Caribbean as a stowaway; he becomes the island's "emperor" when some "bush niggers" see him dodge a bullet in a showdown with another man—an escape that they attribute to his magical powers. In fact, the power that Jones is most interested in is economic. To Smithers (who was played by the brilliant Scott Shepherd on the night that I saw the show, and is also played by Ari Fliakos), a cowardly colonialist who envies his success, Jones says, "Dere's little stealin' like you does, and dere's big stealin' like I does." He goes on:

> For de little stealin' dey gets you in jail soon or late. For de big stealin' dey makes you Emperor and puts you in de Hall o' Fame when you croaks. (*Reminiscently*) If dey's one thing I learns in ten years on de Pullman ca's listenin' to de white quality talk, it's dat same fact. And when I gits a chance to use it I winds up Emperor in two years.

Created when segregation, not to mention lynching, was still in effect, Brutus Jones survives as a black man by listening to "white quality talk" and learning to oppress blacks himself. On the island, he is no longer the hunted; he's a gatherer of prey.

Nowhere in the definitive 1962 biography "O'Neill" do the authors, Arthur and Barbara Gelb, indicate that their subject was especially attuned to black life in America. (The most realistic black character in O'Neill's œuvre is Joe Mott, in the 1939 play "The Iceman Cometh.") But we do know that O'Neill was particularly taken with the marginalized—with the detritus washed up on the shores of the sea of life. This interest is what the director of "The Emperor Jones," Elizabeth LeCompte, focusses on here. By casting Valk in the title role, instead of, say, Jeffrey Wright, she adds another dimension to the play: she equates the female with the



Kate Valk reimagines "The Emperor Jones" as a woman in blackface.

DEMETRIOS PSILLOS

black outsider, and she allows Valk to embody the two central themes of American drama, sex and race. By mercilessly exploiting language that the N.A.A.C.P. would find incendiary now—Valk speaks in a different register as she pronounces the "de"s, "dem"s, and "dat"s that pepper Jones's speech—LeCompte also addresses the long-standing controversy surrounding the text. Charles Gilpin was the first Brutus Jones, when the play premièred, at the Playwrights' Theatre, in Greenwich Village, in 1920. By all accounts, Gilpin was a gifted actor, but he drank. The titanic Paul Robeson stepped into the role in 1924, as part of a package with O'Neill's interracial, bourgeois-minded drama "All God's Chillun Got Wings." Robeson was reportedly disturbed by what he perceived as racism in "The Emperor Jones." (W. E. B. Du Bois did not share his view; he wrote, at the time, that O'Neill was "bursting through" black stereotypes onstage and giving the audience "Negro blood.") However, Robeson needed work, and roles for black actors were scarce; his performance in New York and in a London production was likely one of those little soul murders that many black actors must withstand if they're to work at all. LeCompte doesn't comment on the racism of O'Neill's language or ideas by underlining them with a strident moral stance. Instead, in ways that are both brave and sweetly foolhardy, she makes it clear that Brutus Jones is a white man's idea of a Negro. Along the way, she wrests a great performance from Valk, which is, in some sense, an homage to the many black actors before and since Robeson who have had to perform "blackness" in order to be seen.

Replacing the costume that O'Neill proposed for Jones—"light blue uniform coat, sprayed with brass buttons, heavy gold chevrons on his shoulders, gold braid on the collar, cuffs, etc."—with African- and Asian-inspired robes, LeCompte treats "The Emperor Jones" as a monologue of sorts, excising entire passages from O'Neill's text. Seated in a wheelchair, with microphone in hand, and Smithers and two tiny palm trees behind her, Valk pays no attention to the technicians who are onstage to her right, projecting images overhead. She talks and talks, barely shifting in her chair. She conveys Jones's rage, wit, and wiles mostly through her voice and her eyes, the whites of which are made all the whiter by the thick black makeup that coats her face like a minstrel-show nightmare. From time to time, Valk stretches her red lips in an exaggerated grimace. It's a shock to see her at first. The full historical horror of her presentation is heightened by Smithers's snide voice (he's the more "female" character here) and by the distant music and electronic beeps that punctuate Jones's speech—a stand-in for the drumbeats that pursue Jones as he tries to escape across the island after hearing that the "natives" are planning an uprising against him. In a sense, Valk plays Jones as a politician: her stentorian voice and posture recall those advocates of ideology we once believed in. And her fate, like that of many of the politicians who fail us, is decided at the hands of the people. When a red blotch is drawn across Valk's white shirtfront, the gesture speaks louder than all the words that have cascaded from her mouth.

LeCompte's condensed version of "The Emperor Jones," which lasts a shattering sixty minutes, acts as a kind of coda to the Wooster Group's controversial 1981 show "Route 1 & 9." In that piece, most of the actors appeared in blackface and used routines that were made famous on the chitlin' circuit as a jumping-off point for their improvisations (one of which involved ordering from a fried-chicken takeout place). After the première of "Route 1 & 9," the National Endowment for the Arts revoked the Wooster Group's funding. And one can see why: the Group's audience is largely white. Were the actors making fun of blacks, or just crapping on the artistically limited notion of political correctness? Watching video clips of that performance, one misses the sad irony that LeCompte brings to this production. Here she poses the question: Minstrel shows, avant-garde theatre, is there a difference? And can we not learn from both elements of the American theatrical tradition? Just as the Playwrights' Theatre provided a home for O'Neill's early work, the Wooster Group provides a home for its contemporary interpretation. In the end, their version of the work is not so different from O'Neill's: they show us the sea of deception and pretense we all swim in, while searching for the self that is waiting there at the water's edge, if only we could see it. ♦

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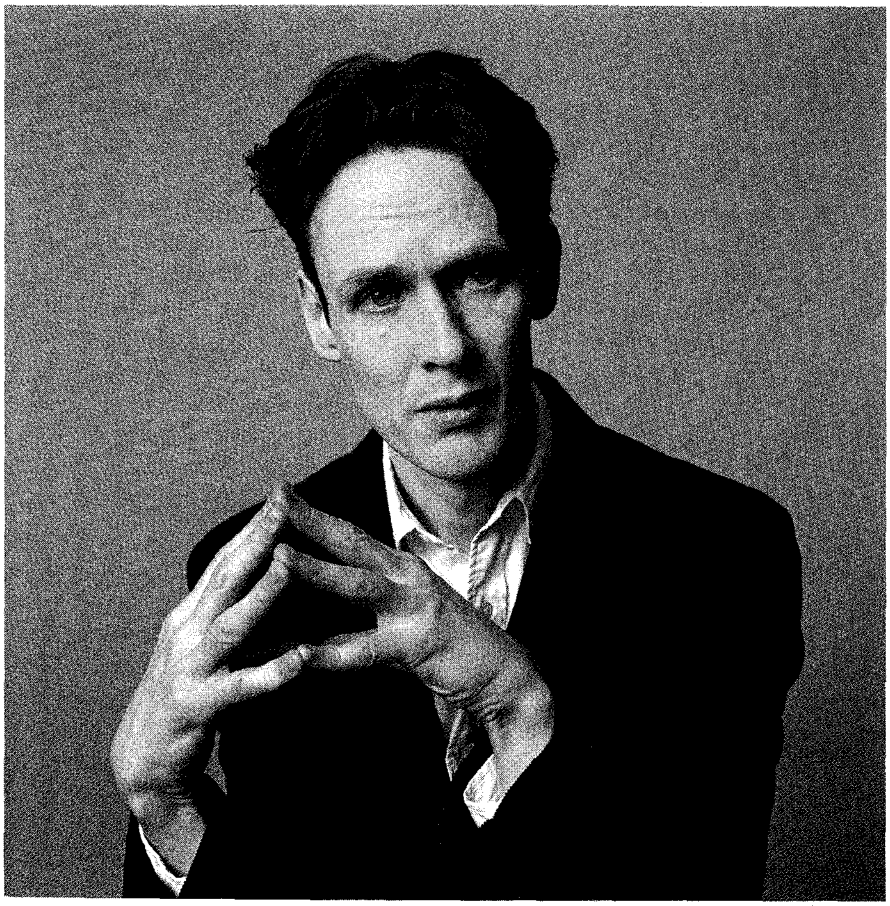
Ian Bostridge sings Benjamin Britten.

BY ALEX ROSS



Bostridge has sung Britten since childhood. Photograph by Steve Pyke.

In July, 1945, Benjamin Britten accompanied the violinist Yehudi Menuhin on a brief tour of defeated Germany. One day, the two men visited the concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen, and performed works by Mozart and others for a silent but intent crowd of former inmates. Stupefied by what he had seen, Britten went home to the East Anglian coast and set to music the most spiritually scouring poetry that he could find—the Holy Sonnets of John Donne. He composed nine songs at feverish speed, beginning, on August 2nd, with "Oh my blacke Soule!," and ending, on August 19th, with "Death be not proud." While he wrote, Death had more to celebrate: several hundred thousand people were vaporized by the detonation of two atomic bombs over Japan. On August 6th, the day of Hiroshima, Britten set Sonnet XIV, which begins, "Batter my heart, three-person'd God." There was an eerie coincidence at work here, for Robert Oppenheimer, the head of the American nuclear program, was spellbound by the same poem, and had it in mind when he named the site of the first atomic test Trinity.

Britten is not the kind of artist one associates with great turning points in history. He was, despite his reputation as England's preëminent composer, a loner, an independent man. He prided himself on his parochialism, tailoring his works to churches and halls around East Anglia and to the amateur musicians who patronized them. He also wrote big operas for international stages, but he kept returning to his roots, his obsessions, his elliptical self. He thought that there was too much intellectual grandstanding in modern music, and demanded that composers make themselves more useful to ordinary people. All the same, his "Holy Sonnets of John Donne" are a titanic statement, one of the most penetrating responses to the Second World War. They do not try to depict horror; instead, they offer the consolation of sublime, transcendent rage. At the end of the cycle, the tenor declaims, on a rising major scale, the words "And death shall be no more"; then he bears down on the word "death" for nine long beats; and, finally, over a clanging dominant-tonic cadence, he thunders, "Thou shalt die." Death does not die, but possibly shudders for a moment.

Ian Bostridge, the British tenor, recently sang an all-Britten program at Zankel Hall, the space underneath Carnegie. It was the first in a series of concerts that the singer is presenting this spring, under Carnegie's Perspectives rubric. Now forty-one, Bostridge has assembled a repertory that ranges across several centuries and several languages; his Carnegie concerts include German lieder, Italian arias by Handel, and twentieth-century works by Britten, Vaughan Williams, and Lutoslawski. The role of curator falls naturally to him, for he is not only a lyric tenor of uncanny focus and intensity but also an accredited scholar (D.Phil., Oxford, 1990, "Witchcraft and Its Transformations, c. 1650-c. 1750") and a deft commentator on musical matters. The day after his recital, I went to talk to him about the undervalued art of singing Britten.

Britten's operas are heard reasonably often in New York—Gotham Chamber Opera recently mounted a musically well-turned production of his 1947 comedy, "Albert Herring"—but the songs do not get their due. At Zankel, Bostridge sang Britten's five Canticles, based on various religious texts, together with the surging song cycle "Winter Words," a setting of Thomas Hardy poems. A search of *Times* reviews and listings suggests that the cycle has received six or seven performances in New York in fifty years. Bostridge may have given the New York premières of the last two Canticles. Even stranger, I couldn't find any evidence of a performance of "The Holy Sonnets of John Donne" in this city since 1989.

"The way some people talk about Britten is an example of everything that went wrong with music appreciation in the late twentieth century," Bostridge told me, over lunch in Chelsea. "For example, they say that he's not very bright in a literary way. You hear this patronizing guff about how there is something wrong with his setting of Rimbaud's French in 'Les Illuminations.' In fact, Rimbaud's diction is on purpose peculiar, because he was in London when he wrote, and was mixing French and English words. Actually, I can't think of any other composer who was so ambitious in his choice of poetry." Bostridge also mentioned the continuing unease over Britten's personality, his psychology, and, above all, his sexuality, which expressed itself in one enduring relationship, with the tenor Peter Pears, and in a series of sexless infatuations with boys.

"I have to confess that none of that is very interesting to me," Bostridge said, with a rueful smile. "What strikes me is that so many of Britten's songs aren't about romantic love at all. Quite a bit of the poetry I sing—the German Romantic lieder of Schumann and Schubert—is, when you get down to it, slightly embarrassing, adolescent stuff. Britten is an adult composer, writing about adult things. The first Canticle, 'My beloved is mine,' is maybe coincidentally a sweet tribute to Peter Pears, but it is really a seventeenth-century poem using erotic imagery in a religious way, and there's a very strong current of that in Christian tradition. The ironic thing about Britten was that he was actually so buttoned up, so embarrassed by sex—so, you know, English."

Bostridge, like many of his generation, was introduced to Britten by way of the composer's huge repertory of music for children. Growing up in London, he sang in a boys' choir, learning pieces like "Friday Afternoons" and "A Ceremony of Carols." He played a Rat in "Noye's Fludde" and the Captain in "The Golden Vanity." In his teen-age years and early twenties, as he became a devotee of the German lieder tradition, he lost touch with the composer. Then he came across a classic Decca LP that featured Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau singing "Songs and Proverbs of William Blake" on one side and Pears singing "The Holy Sonnets of John Donne" on the other. "If somebody had asked me in the abstract if someone could make fantastic music out of Donne's sonnets, I'd have said, 'Come on, they're great as they are. They make music themselves.' But, when I heard this music, I was completely bowled over."

"The Holy Sonnets" were a calling card for Bostridge early in his career. Difficult as it was to compete with Pears's electrifying delivery, Bostridge made the music his own, in concert and in a fine recording for Hyperion. Recently, with the Berlin Philharmonic, under Simon Rattle, he made an authoritative recording of "Les Illuminations," "Serenade," and "Nocturne," three major cycles for tenor and orchestra. He is also making his way through the Britten operas; he has sung "The Rape of Lucretia," "The Turn of the Screw," and "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and will soon take on "Billy Budd" and "Death in Venice." Eventually, he wants to tackle the role of the abusive fisherman in "Peter Grimes," which, these days, is usually assigned to a heroic tenor. "I'm keen to explore my inner sadist," he told me.

"As a tenor, I'm just grateful for the existence of this music," he went on. "As with Schubert, Schumann, and Wolf, you can take the serious, single-minded approach—you can do a one-composer recital, and it really works. It's complex, sophisticated music, but it's also an endless pleasure to sing. At the center of the 'Serenade' is the Dirge, which is very dark stuff, and terribly grating on the voice. Straight after comes the Hymn, with its coloratura, so health-giving for the voice. Out of nowhere, you get this gift."

There was no question that Bostridge's first concert at Zankel was music for adults. This was not the sort of vocal recital at which the listener could expect to skim the poems in the few minutes before the lights went down. The Canticles, which call not only for tenor and piano but also, at various points, for countertenor, baritone, harp, and French horn, incorporate the ecstatic devotions of Francis Quarles; the Chester miracle play "Abraham and Isaac"; an apocalyptic wartime ode by Edith Sitwell ("Still falls the Rain—/Dark as the world of man, black as our loss"); and two of T. S. Eliot's most abstruse Christian meditations, "Journey of the Magi" and "The Death of Saint Narcissus." Britten wrote each Canticle in the wake of a major operatic effort, as if to purge theatricality from his system. All his life, he veered between a childishly innocent view of human nature and a preacher's consciousness of the workings of sin: he had trouble reconciling the light and dark within himself. Bostridge, who says that he is "not stunningly religious," points out that in Canticle II, as in the Sanctus of Britten's "War Requiem," the composer's sense of God is "alien and frightening and Other, a voluntarist God who can do as He likes." He added, "It's a quite scary thing to grapple with."

This riven consciousness is something that Bostridge conveys supremely well. He is not the sort of recitalist who processes all different kinds of music through the same lovely tone and smooth technique. Instead, he works to bring out the storytelling and the drama inherent in song. He is capable of singing in many voices at once, sounding like Noël Coward in one moment and the God of Abraham in the next. Fischer-Dieskau was his model early on, but he also admires Bob Dylan and others who use their voices like knives, to cut through convention. In "The Death of Saint Narcissus," a harrowing scene of failed martyrdom, Bostridge did a hairpin turn in the lines "Then he had been a young girl/Caught in the woods by a drunken old man," going from a smooth, silky delivery to a creepy sort of muttering shout. The singer is almost too happy to take risks, but his technique is secure enough so that he almost always gets away with them.

It was a tribute to Bostridge's standing within the vocal world that he was able to attract two star collaborators to fill out the extra roles in the Canticles: the countertenor Bejun Mehta, who sang the part of Isaac in Canticle II, and the baritone Nathan Gunn, who filled out the complement of the Magi in Canticle IV. David Jolley provided richly melancholy horn solos in Canticle III, and Bridget Kibbey, the harpist in Canticle V, caught the various shades of glitter and menace in the music. Most important, Julius Drake, at the piano, provided a kind of resonant stage for Bostridge's personae, creating a meticulously nuanced play of light and shadow around the voice.

Bostridge's singing of "Winter Words" went to another level. When Britten wrote this cycle, he was no longer the ferocious young genius who had written "Peter Grimes" and the "Holy Sonnets." He was turning forty, and had experienced disappointments together with triumphs. He had discovered that his domestic life with Peter Pears was not going to erase the darker strains in his nature. For "Winter Words," he collected various Thomas Hardy poems about the fleetingness of experience, which weigh the sensations of the instant (a boy's boredom on a long train ride, the creak of an old table, a certain light in the trees in November) against the unfeeling vastness of time. Britten's music finds precise images for that heavy theme, often by juxtaposing bursts of figuration against extended, hypnotically repetitive chordal patterns. Bostridge here set aside the slightly demonic aura that he often delights in presenting onstage (and that cannot be detected in his lunch-table manner); instead, he emphasized the tenderness of his voice, its straw-in-the-wind quality.

Britten's song cycles very often end with a world-stopping cry from the heart: "Death be not proud"; Shakespeare's Sonnet XLIII, in "Nocturne"; Keats's sonnet "To Sleep," in "Serenade." Each is a passionate protest against mundane consciousness, the facts of life, the way things are. "Before Life and After," which closes "Winter Words," is the most extreme, and most affecting, of these denunciations of the outer world. Over a slow, solemn procession of triadic harmonies, it remembers "a time there was . . . when all went well," a primal state before "the disease of feeling germed," and wonders whether such a time could come again. I don't remember anything about how Bostridge sang the last words, "How long, how long?"—only the storm of emotion that was contained in them, the desperation, sorrow, rage, and hope. ♦

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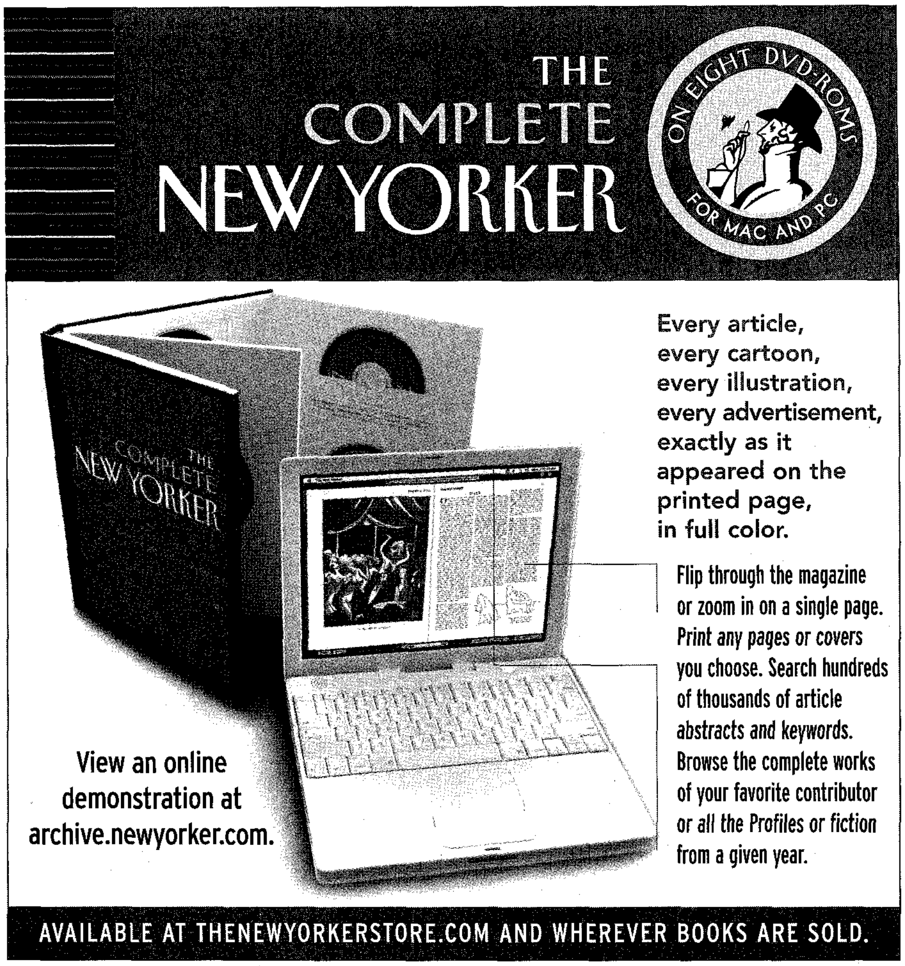
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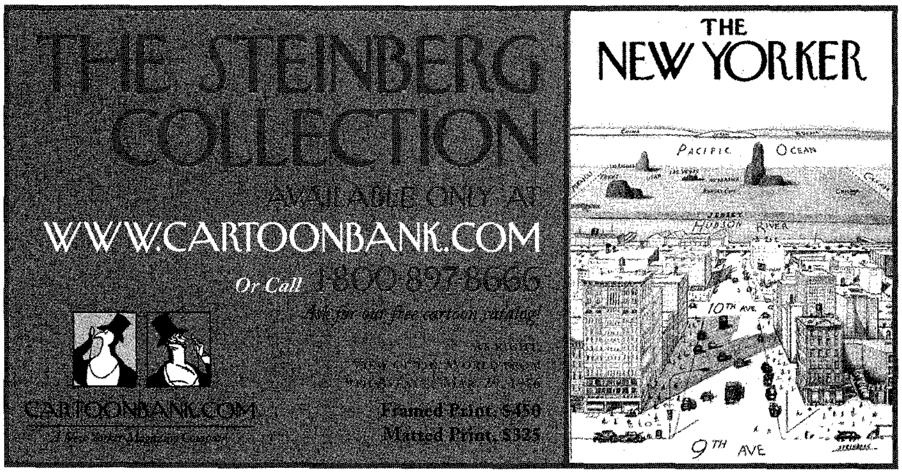
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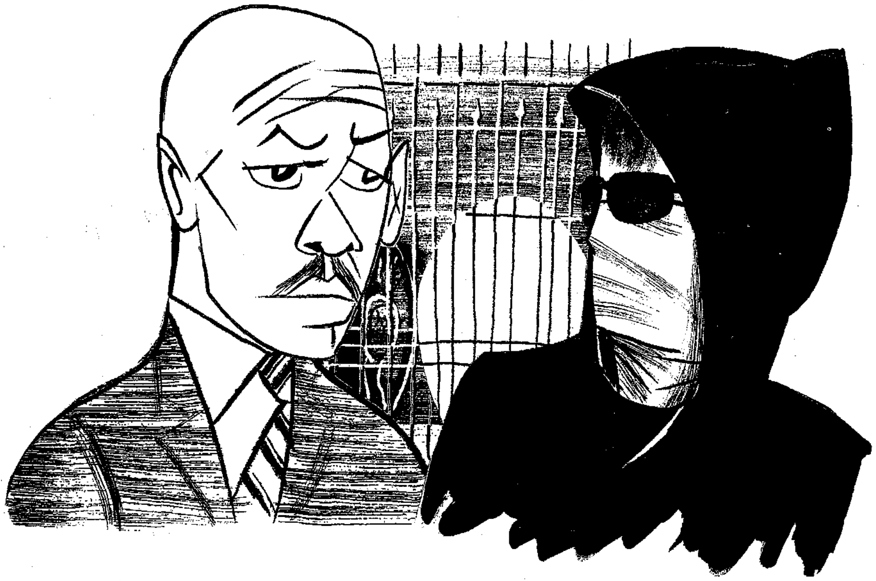
BY ANTHONY LANE



Denzel Washington and Clive Owen in Spike Lee's new movie.

TOM BACHTELL

Much of the new Spike Lee film, "Inside Man," takes place in a bank in the financial district. A gang of thieves walks in, helps itself to hostages, opens the vaults, and waits. This is where Detective Keith Frazier (Denzel Washington) and his partner, Bill Mitchell (Chiwetel Ejiofor), get to do their thing. They are trained in hostage negotiation—a delicate, high-tension skill that depends on the ability to order huge consignments of exactly the right pizza at a moment's notice.

As the standoff grinds on, other players move quietly into place. Arthur Case (Christopher Plummer), the president of the bank, is excessively fraught by the news. Something in one of the branch's safe-deposit boxes means a lot to him, and he hires Madeline White (Jodie Foster) to get it back. Days after the screening, I am still unsure what Ms. White does for a living. The publicity material describes her as "a power player with shadowy objectives," which is another way of saying "vague enough to help us unblock a clog in the plot." Physically, though, everything about her is sharp—shoes, suit, cell phone, nose—and a path is duly cleared for her arrival. She enters the bank, confers with the criminal ringleader, Dalton Russell (Clive Owen), and tries to cut a deal. One thing is obvious: these guys aren't in it for the money. They want something else.

The screenplay, a first-time effort by Russell Gewirtz, displays a double gift: it is clever enough to clutch our attention, but also dumb enough, with large logical holes punched through it at regular intervals, to make the audience feel equally clever for having spotted the mistakes. These include: (1) Voice recognition. Russell may be clad in shades and a white balaclava, but he converses with Frazier in person, and, given that Clive Owen's American accent keeps slipping like an old sock, it should not be hard to pick him out of a lineup. (2) If you own a document that could annihilate your reputation, why keep it in a bank for more than sixty years rather than, say, tossing it in the fire? (3) The document in question, as we learn early in the film, shows that Arthur Case had links with the Nazis. This cannot be true, for one reason: he is played by Christopher Plummer, and, excuse me, but Christopher Plummer does *not* make friends with Nazis. He sings at them! He plays guitar at them! In a daring, nun-assisted escape, he flees from them over the hills with an annoying child on his back! Come *on*.

It soon becomes clear that Lee is not the right director for cops and robbers, still less for the sleights of hand on which "Inside Man" depends. The giveaway is the ending, which is handled with such woeful slackness—twists unravelling, motives clouded, secret conspirators unmasked in haste and to zero effect—that viewers will come out steaming with impatience. On the other hand, why turn to Lee for resolution? If he fluffs it in his plotting, that is because he scorns it in his vision of New York. What turns him on, and triples his energy, is the irresolute side of city life—the jitters, the hand-me-down threats, the shards of ethnic fracture. Is it any coincidence that Shelton Jackson Lee, born in 1957, earned the nickname Spike? And is it any wonder that Denzel Washington, Lee's leading man in "He Got Game," "Mo' Better Blues," and "Malcolm X," has been summoned again to the fray? Washington is too smart, and too deeply versed in the movie business, to trade on nothing more than his languid stride (he has the most unhurried gait since Charlton Heston's), or the ooze of his charm. "Training Day" was a wholesale shedding of his diplomatic gifts, but I prefer the halfway measures of "Inside Man": his Detective Frazier can be funny and flirtatious, but, as we flash forward to some of the interviews that he conducts after the siege is over, we watch the smooth talker develop a rasping tongue.

For that reason, "Inside Man" needs to be seen. The more it sags as a thriller, the more it jabs and jangles as a study of racial abrasion. A hostage is released, and an armed cop shouts, "He's an Arab!" The hostage replies, "I'm a Sikh," and you can hear the weariness at the edges of his fear. Another hostage is quizzed by Frazier about his name: "Is that Albanian?" "It's Armenian," the man explains. "What's the difference?" Frazier asks, not that he cares either way. It is these small, peppery incidents of strife—far more than the stridency of recent Lee projects like "Bamboozled" and "She Hate Me"—that show the director at his least abashed and most tuned to current anxieties, and that mark him out, for all the fluency of his camera, as the anti-Renoir of our time. "Grand Illusion" offered the ennobling suggestion that national divisions were delusory, and that our common humanity can throw bridges across any social gulf. To which Lee would reply, Nice idea. Go tell it to the guy who just had his turban pulled off by the cops.

To that small but intense percentage of moviegoers for whom all Belgian realism is a cause for joy, the arrival of "L'Enfant" will be no less exciting than the birth of their own offspring. The movie, which won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival last year, was directed by Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, who are not to be confused with the Coen brothers, the Wachowski brothers, or, in a major way, the Farrelly brothers. The Dardennes' finest hour was "Rosetta" (1999), set mainly in a trailer park. This time, they have shifted to a defiantly unbeautiful town, with a rat-colored river running through it. The flow of traffic is no less relentless, and the grimmest motif, in a dispiriting tale, is the sight of characters pacing the shoulders of busy roads, or crossing a swollen stream of cars as if it were the Styx. Few of us risk that at the best of times, so what kind of person would try it with a babe in arms?

Sonia (Déborah François) and Bruno (Jérémie Renier), whom you would struggle to describe as a couple, have just had a son, named Jimmy. We first see Sonia, fresh out of the hospital, looking for Bruno and finding him begging at a stoplight. He has sublet their tiny apartment, so the choice of abode is either a hovel down by the water's edge or the local homeless shelter. (If you wish to hear echoes of an earlier family, who also found nowhere to lodge with their firstborn, go right ahead.) In the recklessness stakes, Bruno is the clear winner. "Only fuckers work," he says, and, if money flutters his way, either as alms or through fencing stolen goods, he blows it instantly, as if to prove that preserving or treasuring anything is the act of a dull soul. Even by Bruno's standards, however, his next move sets a new low: he wheels Jimmy off for a walk and returns without him. "I sold him," he tells Sonia, who promptly faints. The rest of the story follows Bruno's efforts to retrieve first his son and then, more haltingly, his girlfriend's good will. You stare at this parade of folly and tell yourself, It will end in tears. And so it proves.

Viewers in Europe have swooned, it is said, at this movie's painful inching toward redemption. Against that, I have to report a slow drip of disappointment. There is much to admire here, not least the speed with which the Dardennes delve into Sonia's plight, and I was suitably spooked by the terrible twilight—the interiors of locked-up garages and vacant, curtained apartments—in which the baby-selling trade unfolds. One should always be wary, however, of being gulled by the rough, harsh-grained manner of a film into assuming that its authenticity must, by definition, run deep. In fact, there is something willed and implausible at the heart of "L'Enfant," beginning with the child himself—the first non-crying, non-hungry infant in human history, let alone in cinema. Could the budget really not extend to a single diaper scene? I have met toy dolls who required more attention to their hygiene needs than young Jimmy.

As for his father, the plan to off-load the boy strikes me as the conduct less of a wastrel than of an outright delinquent. The movie makes a concerted attempt to show Bruno as devil-may-care (he even sports a rakish hat, tilted down like Jean-Paul Belmondo's in "Breathless"), but the Devil seems to have entered his spirit and drained it of charm, and the directors' decision to make Bruno the focus of their concerns feels increasingly misplaced. I wanted more of Sonia, whose wrath seems wholly credible, or of Steve (Jérémie Segard), the schoolboy with the earring and the lupine smile, whose job it is to snatch the bags or the video cameras that Bruno then sells. The scene in which Steve nearly drowns, hiding up to his chest in the bone-chilling river to escape capture, floods the film with its truest rush of emotion; listen to his howling, as Bruno drags him free. Who, you might ask, has earned the title of this film? Jimmy is a swaddled blank; Bruno is a half-wit stuck in adolescence, with a complexion to match; but Steve is the real thing—an Artful Dodger, bent on adult crime, who takes his first gulp of mortal peril and cries like a child. ♦

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Volume LXXXII, No. 6, March 27, 2006. The New Yorker (ISSN 0028-792X) is published weekly (except for five combined issues: Jan. 23 & 30, Feb. 13 & 20, July 10 & 17, Aug. 7 & 14, Dec. 25 & Jan. 1) by The Condé Nast Publications, which is a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: The Condé Nast Building, 4 Times Square, New York, NY 10036. Louis Cona, vice-president and publisher; Michael Hess, associate publisher; Hope Hening, executive director of strategic special projects; Alatia Bradley, advertising director; Jamie Engel, advertising director; Karen Quinn-Panzer, advertising director; Daniella Wells, executive director marketing & strategic planning; Janine Silvera, executive director of creative services; Jacqueline Cinguina, director of integrated marketing; Judy Safir, director of finance and business operations; Edward Klaris, general counsel. Advance Magazine Publishers Inc.: S. I. Newhouse, Jr., chairman; Charles H. Townsend, president and C.E.O.; John W. Bellando, executive vice-president and C.O.O.; Jill Bright, executive vice-president–human resources; John Buese, executive vice-president–chief information officer; David Orlin, senior vice-president–strategic sourcing; Robert Bennis, senior vice-president–real estate; Maurie Perl, senior vice-president–chief communications officer. Shared services provided by Advance Magazine Group: Steven T. Florio, Advance Magazine Group vice chairman; David B. Chemidlin, senior vice-president–general manager, shared services center. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement No. 40644503. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. R123242885. Canada Post return undeliverable Canadian addresses to: P.O. Box 874, Station Main, Markham, ON L3P 8L4.

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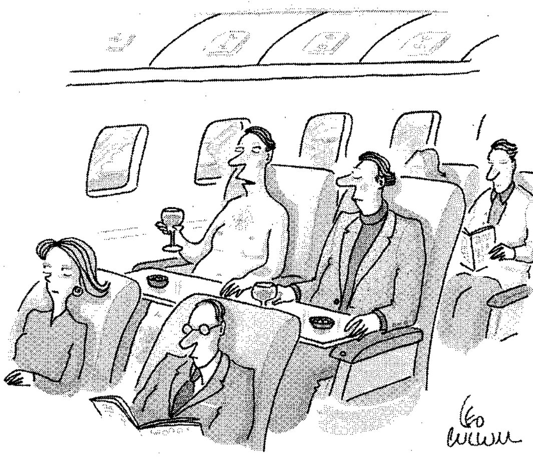
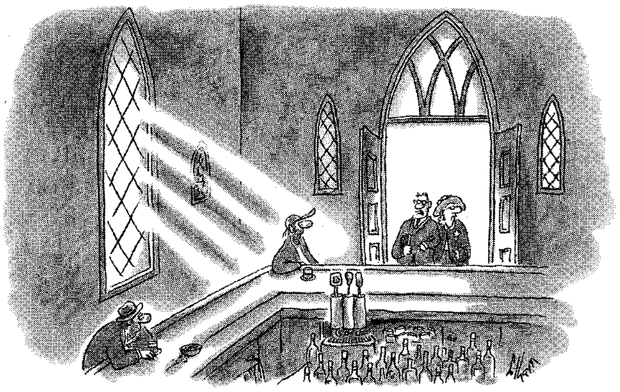
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Charles Barsotti, must be received by Sunday, March 26th. Finalists in the March 13th contest appear below; go online to vote. We will announce the winner, along with the finalists in this week's contest, in the April 10th issue. The winner will be given a signed print of the cartoon. Any U.S. resident age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit www.newyorker.com/captioncontest.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"They give me free drinks if I keep my tray table down."
Jay Cassidy, Los Angeles, Calif.



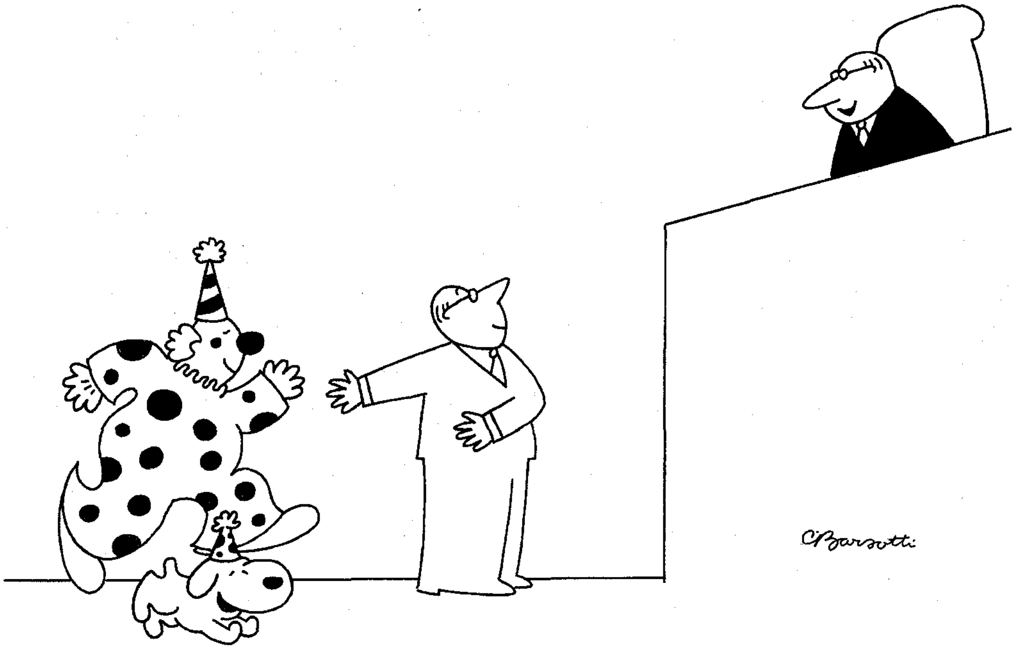
THE FINALISTS

"Hey! Who ya gotta pray to, to get a drink around here?"
Margot Sheehan, New York City

"Finally—a faith-based initiative I can embrace."
Michael Kraatz, Canaan, N.H.

"Just don't order a Bloody Mary."
Hayley Buckridge, Malverne, N.Y.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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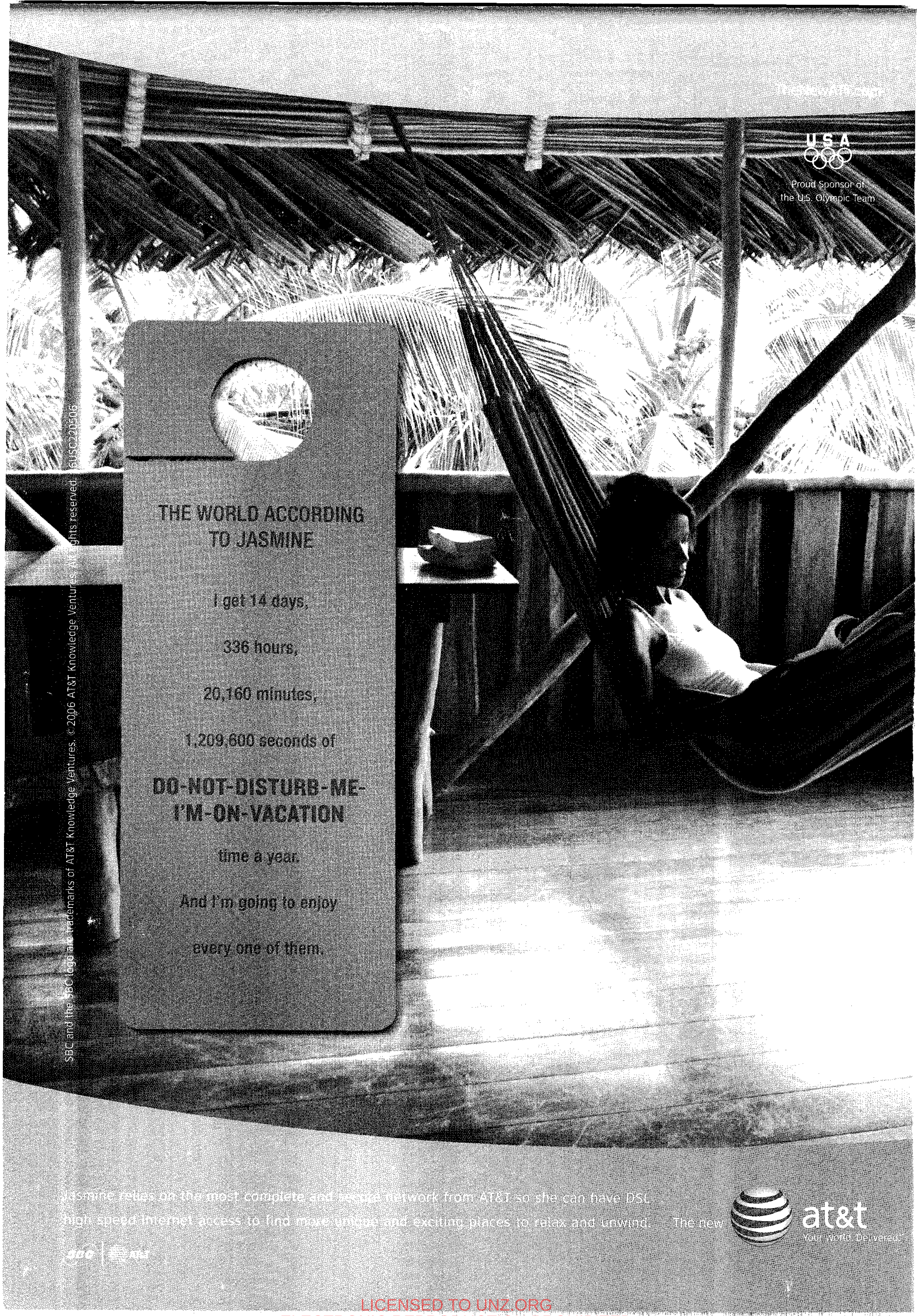
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